

**A CIRCULAR LINEAGE: THE BAKONGO COSMOGRAM AND THE RING
SHOUT OF THE ENSLAVED AFRICANS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS ON THE
GEORGIAN AND SOUTH CAROLINIAN SEA ISLANDS**

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

There is significant literature in the area of Africana Studies describing 'the ring shout'. However, the ring shout is not usually the primary focus. My thesis investigates the ring shout as a cultural legacy between the culture of Blacks in North America—or African Americans for purposes of this research—and Kôngolese culture. It demonstrates the ways in which the ring shout of enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands not only parallels the Bakongo cosmogram, but also embodies it in three-dimensional form. The methods used include an analysis of the Bakongo culture from the Central Western coast of Africa. I use primary and secondary, anthropological, and historical sources to understand the Kôngolese persistence—specifically that of the Bakongo cosmogram—in the ring shout of the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islanders. Shout songs and shouting will also be used as archival devices to understand how different elements such as spirituality and memory existed within the ring shout. In addition, personal accounts of the ring shout from past and present sources are used to enrich the understanding. These analyses will serve to expand what is already known about which elements from the Bakongo culture were retained and which elements were reinterpreted in the enslaved Africans' and their descendants' ring shout.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I was born in Detroit, Michigan ten days after the Detroit Tigers won the World Series. Initially, I lived on Winthrop off of the Jeffries Freeway. I was always that kid saying hi to people that he didn't know. Later on, I lived most of my life on the West side of Detroit, MI right behind the University of Detroit Mercy. People call that area McNichols, "MacNick," or 6 mile (representative of how far you are from downtown). I was down the street from Shrine of the Black Madonna, Fashion Avenue, and Palmer Park. A Coney Island restaurant was a couple blocks away and there was nothing like going to the corner store (my brother and I used to call it the Lotto store) to grab some Better Made BBQ chips, a red Faygo pop, and some red Now and Laters. When my parents moved to Belleville, MI, a.k.a. "the boondocks" I began to be that kid who was always greeted by people that he didn't know.

In retrospect, I believe that through my longing to be back in Detroit I began to write lyrics and make electro-acoustic music. I continued to sharpen my writing and music production abilities when I enrolled at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. I studied English and African studies, but I was a poet, musician, and visual artist on the side. I largely wrote, drew, and made music concerning my people, Black Americans. After undergrad, I decided to enroll in the Africana Studies master's program at Cornell University. There I continued my interest and involvement in Black American expressive subcultures.

My research on contemporary Black American expressive subcultures informs my poetry, painting, and music. I have been a visual artist for eleven years, producing electro-acoustic music for eight years, and was on the University of Michigan's national collegiate poetry slam team from 2003-2006 and Cornell University's in 2007. I find creativity and research inextricably connected. For example, my

involvement in artistry is significant in the future ethnographic research I will pursue in the American Studies doctoral program at the University of Maryland College Park.

Black American expressive subcultures are important to me because these are cultural realms where dreams, hostilities and realities are critically engaged in a North America that is intent on lessening the importance of these expressions. I engage in Black American expressive subcultures and I also pay attention to others who engage in them. The more I interpret Black American expressive subcultures, the more that can be understood about the condition of the people expressing them and about the nation in which they reside.

I dedicate this thesis to the ones
Seeking to solve the mystery of where they from.
Persistence of our culture is persistence of the sun.
We rise when we're born and we set when we're done.
Earth's circular path is our destination.
Earth's circular path is our destination.
Earth's circular path is our destination.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

“The shout, they brought that here with them. My people brought it to the States with them” (Down Yonder).

-Deacon Jim Cook of Mt. Calvary Baptist Church

Wherever in Africa the counterclockwise dance ceremony was performed
–it is called the ring shout in North America–
the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods,
the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of movement
(Stuckey 12).

-Sterling Stuckey

As the days come and go only to come back in slightly different form so do styles, languages, and cultures. Lineage is not a straight line, but a coil that changes and repeats, changing in space, but repeating in structure. Simon Bockie, a native of the not so democratic Democratic Republic of Congo, anthropologically uses his personal experience and spiritual anecdotes from people he has interacted with in the DRC to convey the invisible world that is present in Kôngo life. He concurs, “Human life is not seen as rushing headlong through linear history toward death, on a collision course with itself” (Bockie 140). Anthropologists John M. Janzen and Wyatt

MacGaffey add to Bockie's conclusion and write that: "BaKongo believe and hold it true that...life has no end, that it constitutes a cycle. The sun, in its rising and setting is a sign of this cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change" (Janzen and MacGaffey 34). The Bakongo¹ believe in the circular lineage of life and in my thesis, I will trace a circular lineage of one type of Black American cultural practice, the ring shout.

The title, *A Circular Lineage*, captures the inter-connectedness of the living with the ancestors and the possibility for re-living, an ordered circle of life. While emphasizing the inter-connectedness of life and death, *A Circular Lineage* also demonstrates the lineage of two African circular formations, the ring shout and the Bakongo cosmogram.² *A Circular Lineage* investigates a cultural legacy between Black culture in North America and Kôngolese culture in the Kôngo-Angola region by demonstrating the ways in which the ring shout of enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands not only parallels the Bakongo cosmogram, but also embodies its design in three-dimensional form.

My interest in the ring shout stems from my involvement in Hip Hop culture and the cipher (or a circular formation where people improvise words, music, and dance; it is arguably the birthspace of Hip Hop culture). Mentioning my involvement in Hip Hop culture in Dr. Robert Harris's ASRC 601, he told me, "that sounds like the ring shout." I said, "ring who?" He then referred me to Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture*. There I read about the ring shout's importance to Black American music and

¹ Congo's largest ethnic group located in the broad arc in southern Congo (Decalo 42).

² The Bakongo cosmogram is a drawing, emblem, and formation that exemplifies Bakongo religious belief.

realized that by studying the circular lineage of the ring shout I could historicize Hip Hop culture/music, which will be a future focus.

I am inspired to study the ring shout of Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islanders to understand its African origins because of the observations that anthropologist Melville Herskovits found in *The Myth of the Negro Past*: "...some of the most extensive retention of Africanisms in all the United States is found in the Sea Islands..." (117). He adds, "That the Seas Islands of the Carolina and Georgia coast offer the most striking retention of Africanisms to be encountered in the United States is to be regarded as but a reflection of the isolation of these Negroes when compared to those on the mainland" (Herskovits 120). Baird and Twinning concur in their essay "Sea Island Folkilife," and write:

Some of the islands are located far enough out in the ocean to require boats for transportation, while others are now connected (since 1930s) to the mainland by bridges or causeways, making access possible by car or bus. The continuing inaccessibility of some rural islands such as Sapelo and Daufuskie, a key factor in their economic and social life, perpetuates the isolation that has so significantly operated to preserve the folklore and culture of the Sea Island area (387).

The unique isolation of the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands left space for enslaved Africans and their descendants to continue and reinterpret their cultural rituals maintained in memory, but changed in space. "A Charleston planter told his English guest, Captain Basil Hall, in 1827, that he made no attempt to regulate the habits and morals of his people except in matters of police, 'We don't care what they do when their tasks are over—we lose sight of them till the next day', he said" (as qtd.

in Herskovits 117). "...white slaveholders took little interest in these gatherings, leaving blacks largely to themselves to formulate and perpetuate their religion" (as cited in Pollitzer 137). Not only were the inhabitants of the Sea Islands isolated geographically, but they also experienced significantly less oversight by European "planters" relative to their mainland brothers and sisters. The decrease of European oversight increased the integrity of their diverse cultural rituals. In *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia* Buis and Rosenbaum add to this notion and write that, "The integrity of the early form of the ring shout has survived in unbroken traditional practice form slavery times in the Bolden, or "Briar Patch," community in McIntosh County on the coast of Georgia" (1).

The Sea Islands' exclusive locations open the possibility to use contemporary sources when discussing the ring shout practiced during slavery without being completely anachronistic. For example, a description of the ring shout from a participant in the Union Army on the South Carolinian Sea Islands parallels, with few changes, a description of the ring shout from McIntosh county Shouters of the Georgian Sea Islands almost 150 years later ("Under" 198) (Rosenbaum 2). Buis and Rosenbaum concur, "I believe that it makes sense to follow a mid-nineteenth century account of a ring shout with a comparison to the shout in Bolden today..." (Rosenbaum xi).

There was a high transatlantic frequency with which enslaved Africans who were forcibly transported directly from the Kôngo and Angola region to the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands through Charleston's and Savannah's ports. The significant importation rate makes it reasonable to suggest a significant amount of

Bakongo and Ovimbundu³ cultural retention there. Culture moves with people. In addition, those enslaved Africans from the South Carolina coast who were imported from the Angolan port and traded in the coastwise slave-trade across the Sea Islands contributed significant amounts of Bakongo retentions throughout the land. Deacon Cook from McIntosh County, GA stated explicitly that his forebears, born in slavery, told him that their ancestors had brought the shout off the ship from Africa in the 1700s” (Rosenbaum 5). Hence, my research question: “How is the ring shout ritualized by the enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands an embodiment of the text, belief, and art of the Bakongo cosmogram?”

My thesis will use primary and secondary sources. These sources will be used in order to parallel the ring shout with the Bakongo cosmogram. The main sources of this work will be derived from: primary and secondary, anthropological, and historical evidence. This evidence will be used in order to understand the Bakongo cosmogram’s visual and philosophic uses; (2) the living memory of those who have engaged in the ring shout, including written and oral accounts such as interviews, folktales, narratives and songs; and (3) recent video footage and sound recordings of the ring shout in McIntosh County, GA to understand the ring shout both sonically and kinetically.

The two most important things that I would want people to leave with are: (1) the Bakongo cosmogram is not only embodied by, but is also incomplete without the sonic and kinetic energy of the ring shout; and (2) that with the new understanding of the ring shout’s meaning and its importance as the nexus between the roots in Africa

³ Ovimbundu are members of either Mbundu or Ovimbundu, largely traders, farmers and herders, who occupy Angola and share cultural overlap with the Bakongo.

and fruits in North America of Black American culture, you apply the new meanings elsewhere in Black American culture in order to demystify the music, language, and ways of the culture.

A Brief Description of Ring Shouting

It is important to know what shouting is before going further. I will briefly describe shouting and shout songs, how they come together to form the ring shout, and how the ring shout has changed.

Shouting is the specific shuffling dance occurring in the ring shout to the music of the stick. The stick is the musician using the end of the broomstick to mimic the sound and rhythm of the drum. Shout songs are the songs sung within the ring shout. Both shouting and shout songs were ways that dialogue was maintained between enslaved Africans, their descendants, and their ancestors. When enslaved Africans and their descendants engaged in the ring shout, they entered in direct and indirect communication between themselves and the cosmos through song, dance, and music. They left wherever they were for a trek to a spiritual realm.

Elements of the ring shout were changed as its participants adapted to the slavery society of North America. The 1740 South Carolina Slave Code was one of the many elements of slave society forcing enslaved Africans to adapt the ring shout. The 1740 South Carolina Slave Code⁴ outlawed the use of drums, among other things. It stated:

And for that as it is absolutely necessary to the safety of
this Province, that all due care be taken to restrain

⁴ The South Carolina Slave Code was a result of the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and one of the largest slave rebellions in South Carolina.

the...using and keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their [or the enslaved African's] wicked designs and purposes...(South Carolina).

For enslaved Africans, the use of broomsticks and hand clapping and foot-stomping for percussion became viable alternatives to using the drum. Using Gullah and Biblical language instead of Kikongo (or the language of the Bakongo) are also ways in which elements brought from the Kôngo or Angola has changed. These adaptations suggest more than Bakongo retention and further demonstrate Bakongo reinterpretations that lead to syntheses of the old and new. Just as it is true that culture moves with people, as long as people can move, so will the culture.

A participant in the Union army gives a detailed account of what happens in the ring shout specific to the Sea Islands in South Carolina during North American slavery. His account is also reminiscent of the ring shout in the Sea Islands of Georgia (Rosenbaum 2). In an article written in August of 1863 in *The Continental Monthly; Devoted to Literature and National Policy (1862-1864)* a soldier recorded his interpretation of the ring shout:

After the praise meeting is over, there usually follows...the 'Shout'...Three or four, standing still, clapping their hands and beating time with their feet, commence singing in unison one of the peculiar shout melodies, while the others walk round in a ring, in single file, joining also in song. Soon those in the ring leave off their singing, the others keeping it up the while with increased vigor, and strike into the shout step...This step is something halfway between a shuffle and a

dance...At the end of each stanza of the song the dancers stop short with a slight stamp on the last note, and then, putting the other foot forward, proceed through the next verse. They will often dance to the same song for twenty or thirty minutes, once or twice, perhaps, varying the monotony of their movement by walking for a little while and joining in the singing...the dance calls into play nearly every muscle of the body...The children are the best dancers, and are allowed by their parents to have a shout at any time, though, with the adults, the shout always follows a religious meeting, and none but church members are expected to join ("Under" 198).

Notice this account does not mention a counter-clockwise motion as Stuckey did, nor the presence of broomsticks or drums, but all of the other elements are similar to descriptions of much of the literature and recordings of the ring shout. Also, the Union army participant does not give gender descriptions of the audience in the ring shout. The Bakongo people also have circular rituals, characterized by the Bakongo cosmogram, where a formation similar to the ring shout is performed. One circular ritual is performed at funerals and another one is performed at oaths. Both rituals are influenced by the Bakongo cosmogram.

A Brief Description of the Bakongo Cosmogram

I will briefly describe the Bakongo cosmogram and its meaning to the Bakongo people. On the next page in figure 1, writer, editor and photographer Tom Gidwitz illustrates the Bakongo cosmogram:

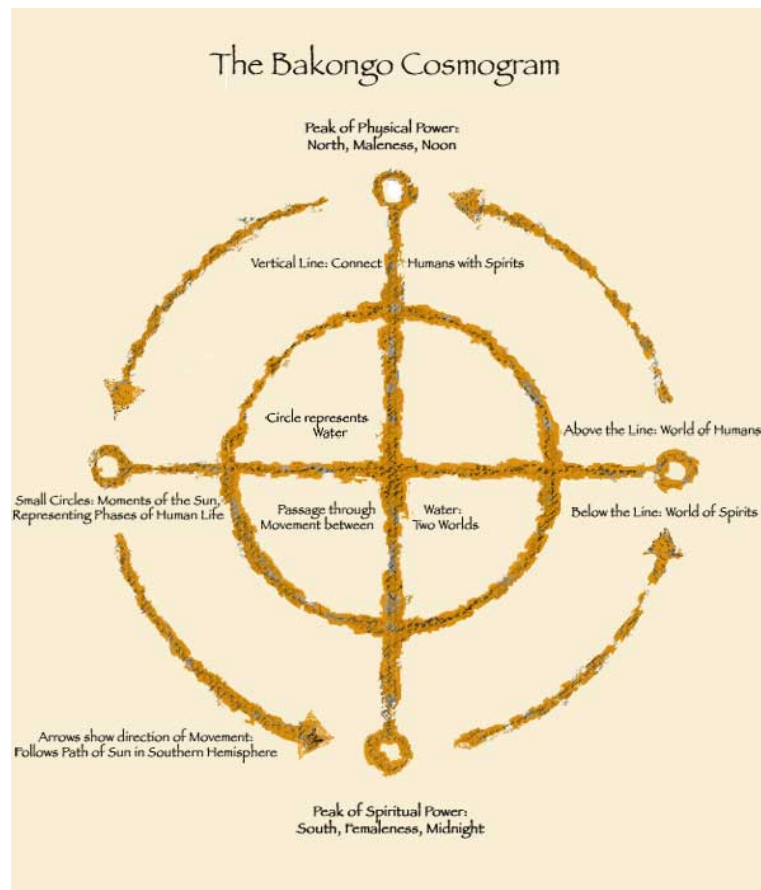


Figure 1: Illustration of the Bakongo Cosmogram (Gidwitz).

As illustrated, humans live in the realm above the horizontal (or *kâlunga*) line, the terrestrial world. Similar to the appearance of the sun, a human will rise (or be birthed) in the east, and set (or die) in the west. In the realm of the spirits and ancestors, the submerged world, the opposite is true. Hence, a person is reborn in the west and begins to die in the east, only to begin the cycle again. The *kâlunga* separates the biological from the spiritual. The vertical line symbolizes the bio-spiritual connection between humans and spirits. To name a few ways to connect, this line can be accessed through words, music, and dance. Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau's *Tying The Spiritual Knot: African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kôngo* is one of

the most comprehensive books that give insight into the system of mainstream Kôngo religion. As a native-authority on Kôngolese culture, he illustrates the cycle of life and death in terms of increase and decrease that occurs within the cosmogram. His diagram enriches the understanding of what is happening on an energy level in the upper and lower worlds in figure 2 below:

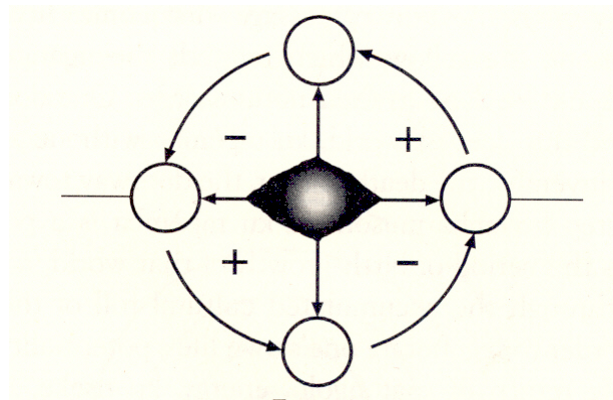


Figure 2. The energy of humans and spirits above and below the kâlunga (Fu-Kiau 33).

Fu-Kiau's diagram represents a continuous cycle of life-death-life-death.

The cosmogram emblemizes the separation, connectedness, and communication between humans, spirits, and ancestors. The Bakongo cosmogram is also a diagram of the cosmos that exemplifies Bakongo religious belief and was used in funeral ritual; moreover, it is a sacred piece of art, which one can take oaths upon once drawn in the ground because it is believed that God's energy is present there.

The cosmogram is not only representative of a religious belief of the Bakongo people, but there are shared aspects of it throughout different types of African cultures. Its origin is as ancient and unknown as time. However, it can be said that the Bakongo cosmogram has at least existed since the origins of Bakongo culture.

Questions that will be investigated are: How did the shout and shout songs function as forms of dialogue between the living and ancestors? How do the bodies of and lyrics of the shouters serve as texts? What do the texts remember? How do the shouters embody the text, art and belief of the Bakongo Cosmogram?

These questions are important because it has been suggested that spirituals originated in the ring shout, and that the ring shout is the birthplace of Black music in North America. Stuckey writes, "... [The African's] religious vision was subtle and complex, responsible for the creation of major—and sacred—artistic forms" (24). He further notes:

"Marshall Stearns writes 'if we start with a more-or-less African example such as the ring-shout, we can see that as the rhythm dwindled, the melody lengthened and harmony developed.' In other words, the ring shout itself may well have provided the creative breakthrough that led to spirituals being sung outside the ring..." (as qtd. in Stuckey 30).

It is suggested here that what is now known as the spirituals were first sung as lyrics in the ring shout. At one point, those who sung what is now known as the spirituals inside of the ring shout left the ring shout. Subsequently, their songs were distinguished as the spirituals. The ring shout was also a part of the context in which jazz music was produced (Stuckey 95). That the ring shout was a part of jazz's context means that while the ring shout was happening in New Orleans in the form of the Second Line dance, mulattos from Haiti were introducing their horns to enslaved Africans on Congo Square. Stuckey has often implied that Black music in North America has been influenced by the ring shout both directly and indirectly. If this is true, further investigation of the Bakongo retentions in the ring shout and the

reinterpretations of the ring shout in North America may enhance our understanding of the cultural, musical, and spiritual elements found in other forms of Black American music and performance.

Literature Review

In this section I will map the intellectual conversation of authors who have written directly or indirectly about *A Circular Lineage* and discuss their relationship to each other, and more importantly, to my research. First, I will follow an order of relevancy and then one of chronology. They will be examined in the following order of relevancy to the African retentions and the ring shout: William Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits, John M. Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey, Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price's, and Robert Farris Thompson will be examined for their work on African culture, retentions, and innovations; Albert J. Raboteau, John W. Blassingame, Sterling Stuckey, Margaret Washington Creel, and Johann S. Buis and Art Rosenbaum will be considered for their direct work on the life of enslaved Africans and their descendants and the ring shout. These are all central texts to my research on the Bakongo cosmogram and the ring shout of enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands.

Scholar's discussions of African Retentions

To thoroughly understand how Black American cultural adaptations have their inspiration in Africa, it is relevant to trace the African provenance of their retentions through scholarship.

Through anthropological fieldwork *Continuity and Change in African American Culture* by William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits shows how music can be used as a historical device. The book is a series of 15 collected essays on

contemporary African cultures. It follows the trajectories of traditions up to their innovations by reviewing particular aspects of a tradition. The essays account for the dynamic nature of African cultures such as the Ibo and Wolof, thus, complicating the arguments of African retentions in America—for how can elements that are constantly changing travel across the Atlantic in a static form. The Africans' spiritualities and the ways of seeing the world were not static, but continued to change once they were enslaved. Elements of their ritual as well as their religious thought changed, but more in image than in their fundamental nature, which can be demonstrated as we trace the circular lineage from the Kôngo. Their religious thought changed more in image than fundamental nature that can be traced from the Kôngo.

John M. Janzen's and Wyatt MacGaffey's *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts From Lower Zaire* convey Kôngo religious thought from the recordings and translations from Kôngo religious leaders and missionary resources. The anthology consists of fifty-one translations each covering a different aspect of Kôngo religious thought. Many of the translations come from Kôngo religious thinkers; consequently, Jansen and MacGaffey challenge the reader to prioritize the word of the mother tongue before that of the father tongue, the word of the indigenous speakers of Kikongo above that of the foreign speakers of Kikongo. Even though the recordings take place in the 1960s, the Kongo religious thought is similar to the ways in which enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands perceived time, space, and communication with the spirit world and should not be ignored as anachronistic. Of particular interest to me are the translations that discuss Kôngo cosmology. This will give insight into the Bakongo spiritual worldview and ritual that participants in the ring shout embody.

Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price's *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* attempts to follow a trajectory of the acculturation

that occurred in African cultures in North America. Their anthropological study explicates the idea of African acculturation in North America and the extent to which American society has influenced African culture and vice versa. They do not agree with Herskovits's suggestion that Africanism comes from only Western African cultural practices, but believe that Africanisms are much more diverse. Mintz and Price insist that other things, such as style and values, are also a part of Africanisms. Mintz and Price attempt to complicate the socio-historical interpretation of African American culture, "call[ing] for 'greater analytical subtlety and more socio-historical research...'" when it comes to the study of Afro-Americans in anthropology (Mintz and Prince xiv). An idea shared by both Herskovits and Mintz and Prince is that to study Afro-America, one must be prepared to study the struggle of humanity against oppression and also realize that everyone's oppression and struggle against that oppression was not equal. If as some Africans were being enslaved others were running away from slavery, the past is a fluid entity and never static. There are always myriad influences impacting time and struggle.

Robert Farris Thompson touches on some of these influences that impact time and struggle that survived the initial trauma of African enslavement in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. He investigates the "coincidental" cultural similarities between Kôngo religion, culture, and art and the religion, culture, and art of the Caribbean and Americas. Thompson, then, suggests a more deliberate transmission of Kôngo religion between the three landscapes. The best summary of this book is described by Thompson in his intro:

Flash of the Spirit is about visual and philosophic streams of creativity and imagination, running parallel to the massive musical and choreographic modalities that connect [B]lack persons of the western hemisphere, as

well as the millions of European and Asian people
attracted to and performing their styles to Mother Africa
(xiv).

Each chapter begins with descriptions of different African art, religion and culture and transitions into their relation to the religion, art, and culture in the Caribbean and the Americas. Thompson discusses Yoruba Art and Culture in the Americas, Vodun religion and Art in Haiti, Mande-related Art and Architecture in the Americas, and Ejagham Art and Writing in Two Worlds, but of particular importance to my study is his investigation of Kôngo Art and Religion in the Americas.

Thompson's discussion of the Kôngo, in addition to their cultural persistence in Gullah culture, is relevant to understanding elements of dialogue in the ring shout. Communication with the ancestors in Kôngo religion is extremely important, and in order to occur, one must transcend the reality in front of them bio-spiritually. While in communication with the ancestors one is spiritually in dialogue with them. This communication is disguised to the outsider as music and dancing in the ring shout, while in reality, the disguise is the text that is used to communicate. His work emphasizes the important role that memory plays in Black cultures and even how it can be transferred through art and the body.

Looking at the art and body as texts in Black American culture complicates how dialogue is interpreted. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates believes that Black American literary texts are critical of each other through their existence as texts. He further explains this literary tradition:

The black tradition is double-voiced. The trope
of the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to

other texts, is the unifying metaphor within this book.

Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced,
epitomized by Esu's [divine trickster figure in black
culture] depictions in sculpture as possessing two
mouths (Gates, xxv).

His theory on signifying can be used as a mode of inquiry into revealing the complex elements of Black American culture that traditional analytical procedure has not made clear. The unnamed or (mis)named become those that name. Esu is the Yoruba deity that has this power to name (or *àshe*), and thus, to create.

Shouters distinguish shout songs from hymns even though the two cultural forms share many biblical similarities. Over time, shout songs have transformed from Kikongo to Gullah and English. They have also transformed from being more improvised to being more formalized. Their adaptations over time in a Christian dominated North America widened their capacity to make Christian notions useful in African culture. The shout songs make Christian notions double-voiced and useful in conveying African religious cosmology and resisting the dehumanizing forces of enslavement. This sheds light on the ambiguity of African retention by illustrating an insistence to be heard as both a person in North America and as a person from the African continent, hence the phrase, “double-voiced.”

Scholar's discussions of the Ring Shout

The ring shout exemplifies the double-voiced nature of the African American experience, expressing the voice of the African, but sounding Gullah or like a Black American. The ring shout has a longstanding importance in Black American music and religion. The definition of the ring shout lies in its name: ring, denotes the circular formation that enslaved Africans and their descendants gather in to engage the

ring shout. Shout indicates the counterclockwise motion of the people who shuffle their feet and vary their hip and body movements that take place with the ring shout. The lyrics sung are called shout songs and are used while the ring shout is in motion. The ring shout was integral to the religious outlook of enslaved Africans on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands.

Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South by Albert J. Raboteau is critical to understanding the traditions and, more importantly, the innovations of the religion of enslaved Africans and largely from enslaved Africans’ perspectives. From sources such as folklore, slave narratives, oral accounts, church records and cultural anthropologists, Raboteau creates a hetero-glossic⁵ text that informs the reader of the complex nature of the enslaved African’s religion. He pays homage to both Melville Herskovits’ and E. Franklin Frazier’s debates on Africanisms in American culture, which are the African retentions and re-interpretations in North America. Herskovits argued that Africanisms existed in enslaved African cultures. While Frazier argued that due to the conflict and trauma from African enslavement, Africanisms in America had been lost. Raboteau pays homage to both of these perspectives by navigating the enslaved African’s religious origins and the autonomy of their religion in North America.

He also illustrates what happens when “primal” religion meets “classical” religion. His book demonstrates what the “primal” religion gave to the “classical” religion and vice versa. Most importantly, it underpins the biblical imagery of the shout songs and their use in the not so biblical ring shout. It shows how the Africans used a religion that was not their own and made it unique to their situation as Africans

⁵ By hetero-glossic, I mean that he uses diverse texts that go in and out of different textual genres in order to convey the enslaved African’s religion.

in North America. In this way enslaved Africans could retain their humanity while being immersed in a dehumanizing society that largely believes in and supports the enslavement of Africans.

John W. Blassingame's *Slave Community* gives insight into the intimacies and humanity of enslaved African communities on the plantation from the perspective of an enslaved African. From the dehumanizing process of enslaving ethnic groups commencing in Africa to the cultural elements of those groups that remained strong in North America, Blassingame creates a holistic picture of the history and culture of enslaved Africans in North America. Through, if you will, shackled eyes, Blassingame investigates enslaved African culture, family, runaways, and rebels. He also examines the realities of plantation life, such as food allotted, clothing worn, and schedules worked. Many slave autobiographies and memoirs inform Blassingame's narrative.

This narrative is important when considering the environment in which some enslaved Africans were entrenched. By understanding the intimacies of plantation slavery, one can better realize what enslaved Africans were against. Enslaved Africans had to preserve different elements of their humanity and culture in order to survive. Since resistance is only taken in an effort to preserve something, this suggests that enslaved Africans were involved in resistance in many different ways. Resistance in that sense links to my theory about the existence of elements of Bakongo culture in the ring shout. Enslaved Africans preserved something by engaging in the ring shout.

In his book, *Slave Culture*, Sterling Stuckey demonstrates what enslaved Africans were preserving by explaining the roots of slave culture, the ways in which they have lineage from Africa, and their evolution into Black Nationalism. Stuckey further explains the ways in which being from the continent of Africa was a common

link between enslaved Africans and the basis on which Black Nationalism was created. He suggests that enslaved Africans' ethnicities were the primary force that created the initial Black unity in North America needed for Black Nationalism. The ring shout is a part of slave culture that Stuckey uses as an initial site for Black Nationalism where many African cultures came together placating their differences with the commonalities they shared for survivalist, political, and cultural reasons. His descriptions and insights about the ring shout in the first chapter are important to understanding the central theme of this study. Stuckey suggests the ring shout is circular in shape and horizontal in plane, improvisation and ritual occur in it through shouting, song, and music and its members seem to share a common culture. His descriptions of the ring shout are important to understanding how it functioned while Africans were enslaved. The descriptions also give a theoretical underpinning for *A Circular Lineage* by re-cognizing that there was no sudden amnesia of culture and cosmology when Africans were enslaved and transported to North America, but instead retention of tradition, culture, and behavior to the extent possible.

Another book that explores the ring shout, but in an ethnographic way, is Margaret Washington Creel's "*A Peculiar People*" *Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*. Here, she deals with the selective merger, in a way similar to the way Raboteau examines the "primal" religion and customs of Western Africa and the "classical" religion and customs of Euro-America, among the Gullahs of the South Carolina Sea Islands. Creel writes of this merger:

By combining the edifying features of Christianity and African culture and philosophy, they created a practical folk religion that served them well, under the travail of slavery (302).

Contrary to other enslaved African cultures that were less isolated, Stuckey's argument for the roots of enslaved Africans in North America being essentially African in their origins and adaptations complies with the reality of the Gullahs that Creel examines. Their isolation gives Creel the unique opportunity to examine a less obstructed trajectory of African acculturation through anthropological, linguistic, and historical sources. Creel's close study of the Gullahs will add unique perspectives to considering the ring shout's functions in South Carolina and the friction with Christianity and Bakongo religious cosmology.

Johann S. Buis, Art Rosenbaum, and Newmark Margo Rosenbaum continue the discourse on African retention, but highlight the continuation of the ring shout of the enslaved Africans on the Georgian Sea Islands with the ring shout of their descendants in their book, *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia*. In discussing the African retention of religious dance, they concur with Raboteau and Thompson that it exists. Parallels are also made between Islamic-Arabic and Native American dance to that of the ring shout. These can be future areas to explore.

Parallels between old and new ring shouts can provide more insight into the ring shout of the enslaved Africans from manifestations of it today practiced by their descendants. In its own way, this can show both what has changed and what remains the same from the ring shout of enslaved Africans and that of their descendants. Also, the text includes twenty-five shout songs transcribed by Buis with introductions from the shouters of the song. These can be used as archival devices to examine elements that have persisted and have also been reinterpreted from Bakongo culture interlaced throughout the text of the ring shout.

Art Rosenbaum and Smokey Joe Miller created the film *Down Yonder*, which records and interviews the McIntosh County Shouters and other performers using the

fiddle, banjo, and mandolin. Of special interest to me are the McIntosh County Shouters. This documentary is a lens to visualize the ring shout as it is occurring. Using this lens, I will analyze the ways in which the body serves as a text and the ways in which that text performs and speaks through shouting.

Chapter Outline

Here I map out my thesis. The first chapter carries an introduction. The introduction will familiarize the reader with the scope of the thesis. Next, it will describe the methodology of my research. Following the description of methodology will be a literature review, which will investigate the discussion among scholars about Bakongo and African retentions in North America and the ring shout. Lastly will be the chapter outline, which will outlay a chapter map of the entire thesis.

The second chapter will be titled, “Culture cannot be created or destroyed, but only change form” and examines the Bakongo spiritual worldview that persists in the ring shout of enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. It begins in the Kôngo-Angola region and investigates the spiritual beliefs of the Bakongo through the analysis of the Bakongo cosmogram and descriptions of the ceremonies that accompany it.

There are Bakongo retentions in the ring shout because its participants communicate with the ancestors and each other by shouting in a counterclockwise motion. For example, Thompson and others have said that in the Southern hemisphere of the earth, the sun “moves” in a counterclockwise direction. Stuckey notes that “mourners from Bakongo burial ceremonies danced around the body of the deceased to the rhythms of the drum in the same direction as the sun” (as qtd. in Stuckey 12). This ritual has changed in the context of the U.S. in the sense that other percussive instruments such as the hands or sticks have been used in replacement of drums.

Stuckey concurs concerning the substitution of drums and writes, “The hand clappers standing aside serve the role of drummers in Africa or in Suriname, of the violinist...” (85). Blassingame adds to this notion and notes that, “When slaves had no musical instruments they achieved a high degree of rhythmic complexity by clapping their hands” (Blassingame 125).

The ring shout maintains the cultural essence of the counterclockwise shouting and dialogue with ancestors through shout songs that were similarly engaged in by the Bakongo culture using similar body movements and Kikongo words. I will further elaborate on the belief, art, and text of the Bakongo cosmogram and will begin to answer the question: What are the beliefs, art, and texts that coincide with the Bakongo cosmogram? The answer to that question will lead to chapter three, which will discuss a text of the ring shout, the shout songs.

Chapter three will be titled, “What You Shoutin(g) (A)bout?” Through slave importation, Chapter 3 illustrates the trajectory that forcibly brought the Bakongo directly to the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. By analyzing the content of three shout songs that were sung in the ring shout, it demonstrates how the new cultural landscape changed the enslaved African’s ceremonies and religious thought in image, but not fundamental nature.

It will examine the ways in which dialogue functions in the ring shout’s shout songs. The dialogue that takes place in the ring shout is between its participants, their ancestors, gods, and God. In Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which manifested out of his experience as a teacher with Brazilian urban laborers and peasants, he comments on the importance of dialogue and writes that, “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” (88). In general, African spirituality has a deep bond with words, communication, and their

affect on the world. Black Americans engage in this deep bond when they communicate in the ring shout through various forms of texts, such as shout songs. Through shout songs, the living communicates directly to the ancestors, the gods, and they pass the message on to God.

Throughout this chapter, I will use shout songs and personal testimonies from those who practice the ring shout today to clarify a way that dialogue functioned in the ring shout. In this chapter I will begin to answer the following questions: How do the shout songs function as forms of dialogue between the living and ancestors? How do the shout songs function as a form of memory? How do the shout song's lyrics embody the text, art and belief of the Bakongo Cosmogram? What do their texts say? Beginning to answer these questions will take us into an analysis of another text of the ring shout, the bodies of the shouters.

Chapter four entitled, "Blinded by White Pages" will examine the natural text of the body of the shouters and how they functioned as text, memory, and consciousness. Lastly, Chapter 4 will demonstrate how the ring shout was an ideal site for African syncretism. The analysis of the shouter's bodies reveals more about the communication occurring in the ring shout. The ring shout's design is uniquely made for dialogue in that it is circular, the living participants all stand on the same horizontal plane, and also the shouting is aimed above and below the horizontal plane. Video footage from *Down Yonder*, which documents contemporary ring shouts in the Sea Island of McIntosh County, Georgia, will be analyzed in order to begin to answer the following questions: How does shouting function as a form of dialogue between the living and ancestors? How do the bodies of the shouters serve as texts? What do the texts say? How is shouting used as memory? How do the shouters embody the text, art and belief of the Bakongo Cosmogram through their bodily arrangement and movements?

Following this chapter will be the conclusion. Chapter five, entitled, “A Circular Lineage,” will summarize all of the chapters and delicately conflate the parallels of the ring shout and the Bakongo cosmogram. It will also illustrate the necessity of the ring shout with the Bakongo cosmogram. Lastly, it will suggest further areas of research.

Chapter 2 – Culture is difficult to destroy and to survive, Increasingly changes form

“Culture has rightly been said to be to society what a flower is to a plant. What is important about a flower is not just its beauty. A flower is the carrier of the seeds for new plants, the bearer of the future of that species of plants” (Thiong’o 57).

-Ngugi wa Thiong’o

“Traditional systems of belief have proved to be extremely tenacious in Africa and resistant to basic change. This is due in large part to the fact that they are inseparable from communal life, more likely to adapt to new circumstances than to die out and be replaced”

(Bockie 139).

-Samuel Bockie

“There was a very strong connection, then, between West Central African cosmogony and ritual involving circular movement” (Gomez 149).

-Michael Gomez

As a byproduct of society, culture is similar to what Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o suggests: it is the colorful fruit from the branch of a society. It is the language, music, text, food, cosmology, and political view of part of a society.

Whether consumed, or left to multiply, it will spread its seeds. Culture is contagious and once it is made contact with, it is difficult to forget. Culture is fluid and attempting to destroy it is like attempting to destroy water, it will absorb a fist by widening itself; or it will evaporate into the atmosphere only to come back and saturate the earth. Culture's resistance is like the martial art capoeira in that when it is struck, it moves with the energy of the strike in order to avoid the full brunt of the attack. The culture of the Bakongo was just as fruitful, resistant, fluid, and contagious.

“Kongo spelled with a K, refers to the unitary civilization by which Bakongo (the Kongo [and Angolan] people) themselves refer to their traditional territory and way of life” (Thompson 27). “The Kongo cosmogram is shorthand for the sign of the four moments of the sun and created by Wyatt MacGaffey” (Thompson 28). The Bakongo people refer to the Kôngo cosmogram in fragments such as, the kâlunga (or the horizontal border dividing the upper world from the lower world), Nzâmbi (or God), and Bakulu (or ancestors). However, since the Bakongo people do not have an encompassing term that describes how life in the upper world (or the world of the living) and life in the lower world (or the world of the spirits and ancestors) is connected in a counterclockwise cycle, the conceptual term, Bakongo cosmogram, used. “With this sign the Bakongo miniaturized not only the structure of the universe but also the eternal sources of moral sanction, God above and the dead below” (Thompson 151). The vast belief in and reality of the separation and connectivity of the dead and the living is a widely held belief throughout Africa. One of the forms that the widely held belief takes is the Bakongo cosmogram. What is known of the origins of the Bakongo cosmogram is just as mysterious as that of the universe it describes. Before we begin discussing the Bakongo people's understanding of and their relationship with the cosmogram and their religious cosmology, it is necessary to clarify some misconceptions of the cosmogram.

Common misconceptions of the Bakongo Cosmogram

The Bakongo cosmogram has been commonly misconceived as the sign of the four moments and the counterclockwise motion of the sun. This misconception is similar to the way in which the universe was once understood to revolve around the earth. Stuckey writes that in Bakongo burial ceremonies “following the direction of the sun in the Southern Hemisphere, the mourners moved around the body of the deceased in a counterclockwise direction” (12). He continues, “From the movement of the sun, Kongo people derive the circle and its counterclockwise direction...” (Stuckey 12). Stuckey’s perspective of this moment, as well as that of other scholars such as Cornet and Thompson who named their critical book *The Four Moments of the Sun*, is inaccurate.

In the light of recent astrology, what has been noted as, the four moments of the sun are actually the four cardinal points within the earth’s counterclockwise rotation on its axis while orbiting counterclockwise around the sun. A healer from Waycross Georgia, an area which had a significant Kongo and Angola influence, confirms this view and says: “Take a clean sheet of paper and you draw you a circle on that clean sheet of paper and put a cross in there just like that, you understand. That’s *the four corners of the earth*” (Thompson 152).

I contend that the earth rotates counterclockwise on its axis 360° daily and also orbits the sun counterclockwise yearly. So, the sun is stationary and in fact, the movement during Bakongo burial ceremonies mimics the earth’s counterclockwise rotation on its axis, around the sun, and towards the four cardinal points, or four corners of the earth. The circular formation during Bakongo burial ceremonies mimics the earth’s spherical shape.

Diagrams of the Bakongo cosmogram show four disks moving in a counterclockwise direction representing the sun’s appearance during four moments of

the earth. The four moments of the earth are experienced when one of the four cardinal points of its spherical surface faces the sun, hence, rising (or the sun's appearance in the east), reaching a high (or the sun's appearance in the north), setting (or the sun's appearance in the west), and disappearing below the horizon (or the vanishing of the sun into the south) in order to begin the process all over. I will refer to this occurrence from now on as the four moments of the earth. This does not obscure the essence of what has been said by other thinkers of and believers in what the Bakongo cosmogram represents, but further clarifies it. Before discussing Kôngolese religious cosmology, it is important to understand the language heritage of the Kôngolese in order to understand a wider African cultural overlap.

Description of the Niger-Congo Language Family⁶

Here I will discuss what the Niger-Congo language family is and illustrate its breadth. This will add to the understanding that enslaved Africans could transmit culture through shared language.

Fu-Kiau, a native-authority on Kôngolese culture, uses Bantu as an umbrella anthropological term within which the Kôngo people are one aspect. Hence, the cosmology of which he speaks, though specifically meant for the Kôngolese, is also relevant, on a broader scale, for the Bantu, otherwise known as the Niger-Congo language family. April A. Gordon's and Donald L. Gordon's *Understanding Contemporary Africa* provides analyses of many aspects of older Africa and its current culture, geography, and events. They defined the Niger-Congo language family as:

...one of the four major families of African

languages...with its origins in West Africa. As the

⁶ The Niger-Congo language family is the larger language family of the Kôngolese.

Bantu migrations spread eastward and westward to encompass almost the entire...[region of the continent south of the Sahara], the Niger-Congo language family spread as well. Today the majority of Africa's people speak languages with roots in this linguistic family (Gordon and Gordon 434).

Gordon and Gordon suggest four major families of African Languages because they conflate the Niger-Congo with its Bantu sub-sector. The Niger-Congo and its Bantu sub-sector language family are illustrated in figure 3 from Maureen Warner-Lewis's *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* and shown below:

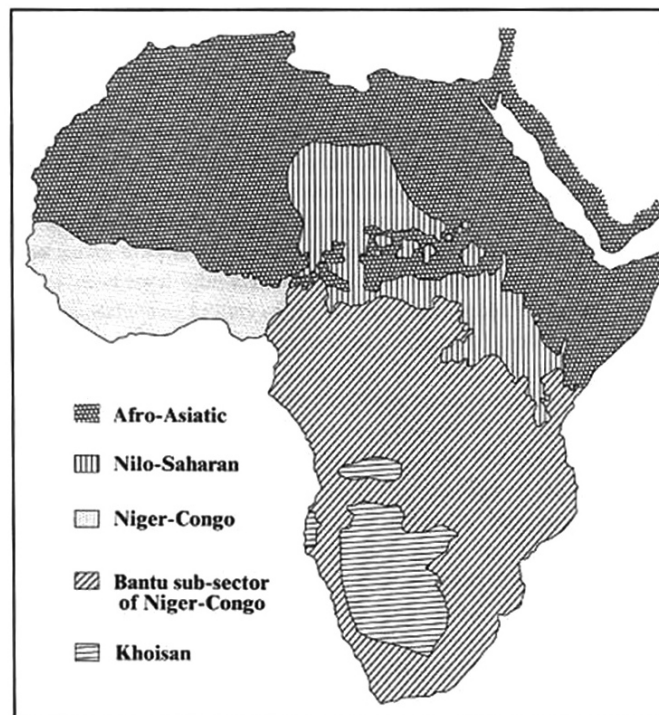


Figure 3. Map of the Language families in Africa (xviii).

As illustrated, the Niger-Congo language family encompasses at least a third of West Africa and the majority of Central and Southern Africa. The degree to which people understand the language of those outside of their ethnic group, but within their linguistic family, varies. In South Africa, for example, due to the close proximity of people speaking different languages, there are some Xhosa and Zulu that I have met that can understand and speak more than one of the twelve languages spoken there, most languages being part of the Bantu family. Language is integral to culture. As language is shared, so is the culture, which is how Kôngolese religious concepts are applicable and carried on elsewhere, especially in the Niger-Congo language family.

More specifically, cosmology from the Bakongo culture was used and understood in other ethnic groups, broadening their beliefs as well, throughout the Niger-Congo language family and beyond. Raboteau shares a similar notion about West African religion containing broader scaled beliefs and writes, "...similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual were widespread among different West African religions" (7). Stuckey adds to this notion of similarity across distance and writes that, "...values similar to those in Congo-Angola are found among Africans a thousand or more miles away, in lands in which the circle also is of great importance" (Stuckey 11). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand how the geographic span of the Niger-Congo language family can hold similar cosmological and ritualistic worldviews from one geographic region to the next and from one ethnic group to the next.

In *The Bantu-Speaking Heritage of the United States* Winifred Kellersberger Vass expands on the linguistic significance of enslaved Africans from the Niger-Congo Bantu sub-sector in a new cultural landscape that forces them to live together and writes that:

Bantu speech has a proven ability to move into a culture,

to absorb it, and to change its language. It has adopted and adapted each new culture group as it has spread from its original nucleus area, probably in the Nok region of Nigeria, down over almost the entire African subcontinent south of the Sahara. The outstanding linguistic homogeneity of this tremendous geographic region is due to this central body of inherited Proto-Bantu vocabulary that still ties all Bantu languages together and proves their once common source..." (Vass 3).

If as language is shared, so to is culture, Vass's observation gives a basis for the retention of African cosmology in the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands⁷. Their common language sources as well as their circumstance as enslaved Africans were significant sources of unity, communication, and cosmological understanding between them.

Elements of Kôngolese Religious Cosmology

With the understanding of the four moments of the earth and the wide cultural influence that the Bakongo could have beyond the Congo-Angola region through their large language family, elements of their religious cosmology will now be described.

Fu-Kiau exposes African cosmology that has not been fully revealed outside of the Kôngo until post 1960, the year of their independence. He notes that,

⁷ The Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina were locations where enslaved Africans of the Niger-Congo language family were significantly imported, especially the Kôngo-Angola region.

Many of [the colonially repressed Kôngo institutions']
unyielding masters [ngudia-ngânga] were executed or
jailed for life. The remaining masters took these
institutions underground for hundreds of years
[approximately until Kôngo independence] for fear of
reprisal from both the colonial and religious powers (Fu-
Kiau 128-129).

Consequently, the information about Kôngolese religious cosmology is fairly new to those outside of the institutions that held it. Two significant elements in Kôngolese cosmology discussed in *Tying the Spiritual Knot* are the conception of the Bakongo cosmogram and the “Vee.” Before we discuss rituals of the Bakongo associated with the Kôngolese religious cosmology, the foundational elements that the rituals are built upon must be discussed and understood: the Bakongo cosmogram and the “Vee.”

A Description of the Bakongo Cosmogram

To describe the inspiration of the Bakongo cosmogram is to illustrate the Cosmogogenesis, the creation of the universe. According to Fu-Kiau, it is widely believed by the Kôngolese that the earth was empty when it began. Fu-Kiau suggests that it was a sphere with a line or skyline that had an empty cavity, and therefore no life (17). From the nothingness, the zero, the empty circle, emerged the kâlunga. “The kâlunga, [a word introduced from Angola] also meaning ocean, is a door and a wall [a means of communication and separation] between those two worlds [or the world of the terrestrial and that of the submerged]” (Fu-Kiau 20). The terrestrial world is occupied by humans and the submerged world is occupied by ancestors and spirits. Both worlds form one community. Bockie explains the meaning of community and notes that:

Beginning with the individual, the total community, like a series of concentric waves, spreads first into the members of the living community; then outward to the recent dead, who are in the process of becoming revered ancestors; and finally to those who have achieved the status of ancestors or little gods, who watch over, guide, and protect the community of the living” (131).

To follow the Bakongo cosmogram is to expand the restricted sense of community beyond the living and to extend it by also incorporating those passed to the other side of the *kâlunga* as an integral part of the community. From now on, when I refer to the community separated by the *kâlunga*, this includes the recent dead, ancestors, and humans.

The *kâlunga* is the horizontal force separating humans from their ancestors and other spirits. “The horizontal force is fundamental, because it is the key to open or to close, to enter or exit the diurnal world, *nza a mwîni, ya ku mpêmbe* and vice versa” (Fu-Kiau 36). In other words, the *kâlunga* line is the door between the living and the dead/spirits/ancestors, all connected by the circular lineage of the community, which is illustrated by the counterclockwise motion of the cosmogram.

Fu-Kiau explains the intersection of the *kâlunga* / horizontal force with a vertical one and writes, “The vertical force, the dangerous and dominant one, is secondary in the balance required for community life [*kinenga kia kimvuka*], its religious relations” (36). He suggests that the most important force in maintaining balance is the horizontal force that separates the living from the dead/ancestors. It is the *kâlunga* that keeps everyone in place so that they can play their roles, but it is through the vertical force that the spiritual relationships are communicated.

The vertical force between the living and the ancestors, the upper and lower

worlds, and the earth and the skies is the bio-spiritual string allowing communication between both kâlunga, God [Nzâmbi], and the ancestors [Bakulu] (Fu-Kiau 36). The ancestors communicate to God through the vertical plane. Fu-Kiau also suggests that through the bio-spiritual string, the ancestors are also given messages from their community in the terrestrial world to deliver to God. The bio-spiritual string is the only means to communicate directly to the ancestors without experiencing death.

The string is bio-spiritual because the human body is used as a vessel to communicate the message of the spirit within it. The vertical plane can be accessed sonically and kinetically. The ancestors are integral to the communication process in the vertical plane. Bockie explains their importance, “In daily life, God is not called upon with appeals for help or protection, or invoked as a witness or a watchful presence. That level of interaction is instead assigned to the ancestors, who serve as God’s intermediaries” (134). Without the terrestrial community effectively communicating desires to the submerged community of the ancestors via the bio-spiritual string, their means to appeal to God is severed.

When kâlunga crosses the bio-spiritual string, it creates an intersection, otherwise known as a crossroads. Each community, forming their own bio-spiritual string, also forms their own crossroads. The crossroads is a crucial area, occupying the space inside of the counterclockwise circle that illustrates the path of life, the four moments of the earth, and also divides the present from the past from the future while also displaying their connections. In this context, the crossroads have four quadrants. Cornet and Thompson describe what the crossroads mean to the Bakongo and complicate the two-dimensional understandings of the crossroads writing, “Crossroads, or forks in a path, are viewed in many Bantu cultures of the Kongo Angola region as virtual cosmograms *trouvés*” (151). Fu-Kiau depicts a virtual cosmogram and the four quadrants of the horizontal plane and the vertical plane that

make it up in figure 4:

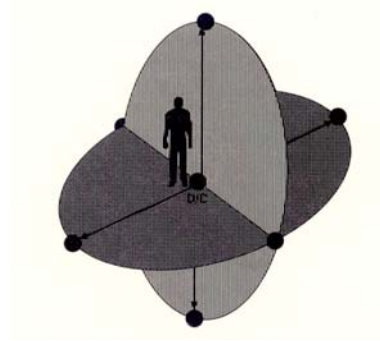


Figure 4. The three-dimensional plane of the Bakongo Cosmogram (134).

According to this illustration, the crossroads occupy the vertical plane as well as the horizontal plane; it also is the exteriorized Bakongo cosmogram. Fu-Kiau complicates the idea of the crossroads and the Bakongo cosmogram and writes,

On the horizontal plane he [or the human being] can move in four directions: forwards, backwards, leftwards and rightwards...[In the vertical plane] he can walk into three more directions...walk downwards, walk upwards, and...walk inwards" (133-134).

The Bakongo cosmogram is not only two-dimensional art, but also a three-dimensional reality continuously interacted with by the community and individual. Fu-Kiau confirms that using the Bakongo cosmogram beyond art is possible and states, "Nothing in the daily life of Kôngo society is outside of its cosmological practices" (38-39). The crossroads at this intersection manifests one of the foundational elements of Bakongo religious cosmology, the "Vee," with four "Vs" occupying different quadrants of the Bakongo cosmogram.

A Description of the "Vee"

The "Vee" looks like the letter V from the English alphabet. However, it is

labeled “Vee” to distinguish itself from the letter. Fu-Kiau contends, “The “Vee” is life and all its realities. It is the center of all existence” (149). Fu-Kiau reveals that the “Vee” exists outside of the written text and manifests itself in everyday life and is in fact life. He suggests that the concept and reality of the “V” is an integral piece of the Kôngo cosmology and foundational to life (130-136). Considering the many places where the “Vee” becomes a factor in real life, what Fu-Kiau is suggesting has immense possibilities for Kôngolese culture and beyond.

Fu-Kiau continues, “The ‘Vee’ is a living energy [“V” I lëndo kiavûmuna] and, as such, it is the basis [fuma/sînsi] of the reproductive web of life [dingo-dingo diantûngila lukosi lwa môyo]” (142). In other words, each human being is the result of two “Vees” coming together, the penetrating “V” of the penis and the accepting “V” of the vagina and open legs. Our range of sight only covers a certain width and that limit is limited to the peripheral width of your eyesight’s “V.” The “Vee” is the beginning of a decision, a crossroads. These listings of the “V” are to open one’s mind to its possibilities.

On the following page in figure 5, Fu-Kiau illustrates the four moments of the sun’s appearance during earth’s rotation throughout the day in terms of the “V”:

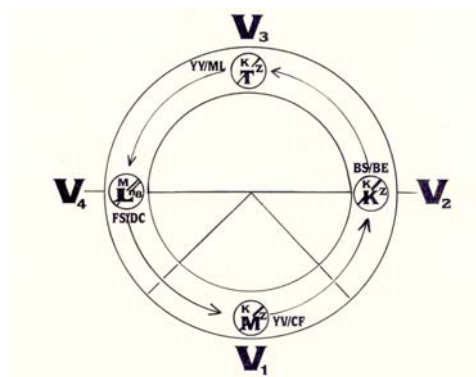


Figure 5. The “Vee” of the Bakongo Cosmogram (137).

The “V” with its opening facing south within the cosmogram is all beginnings, the first (Musoni sun). The second, with the “V”’s opening facing east, is the (Kala sun), the sun of all births. The third, with the opening of the “V” facing north, is the (Tukula sun), or the sun of maturity, leadership, and creativity. The fourth, with the “V”’s opening facing west, is the (Luvemba sun), which is death (Fu-Kiau 136). The “Vee” occupies the four moments of the earth as well as the four moments of life: south, east, north, and west. These four moments illustrate the peak of spiritual maturity, spiritual-death-physical-birth, physical maturity, and physical-death-spiritual-birth. Since the first sun is in the submerged world, it means that before humans are birthed into the terrestrial, their existence begins in the submerged world before or after a spiritual peak. It should be noted that when the “Vee” is at the east or west point that it is in between the realm of the living and the dead, never pointing directly at one or the other. This means that there is not a moment of death that is not at the same time a birth and there is not a moment of birth that is not at the same time a death. Each point between life and death is a transformation, thus, one form of being gives while the other form of being receives. Looking at the Bakongo cosmogram with the “Vee” suggests that there is no definite ending or beginning of existence and the only thing that is for sure is the continuity of the two, how they are each other simultaneously, ending is beginning and vice versa.

Bockie shares some real life anecdotes about physical-death-spiritual-birth. One that stands out is the story about Mrs. Montini. His cousin Jacques had informed Bockie that she had died once before, and to the shock of onlookers and mourners, literally got out of her coffin asking why she had been placed there. Bockie states, “There was no clear division between the end of her earthly existence and the beginning of her ‘beyond death’ experience” (Bockie 94). The old woman stated, “How can I claim that I was dead when in reality I never was? I moved from one

place [or world] to the other without any interruption. It was an automatic move”” (Bockie 94). Fu-Kiau indirectly historicizes this moment and writes, “For the Bantu, there is no death and no resurrection; for them life is a continual process of change” (Fu-Kiau 71). Her story expresses what is meant by there being no distinct moment of death or birth and concurs with the Bantu understanding of the circular lineage of existence. The cosmogram, incorporating the “Vee,” illustrates its reality of ambiguousness, always being at the nexus of death and birth, and claiming neither.

What the “Vee” means in the Bakongo cosmogram is of the utmost significance when considering the gestures of Kôngolese art, drumming, and dance where the “V” is acted out alongside communications between the living and the ancestors. This is done through the positioning of the arms and legs.

Thompson links the stance and attitude in Kôngo statues with that of Afro-American gesture and describes the *booka* [also spelled boka] (or *yangala*) gesture. Thompson writes, “*Booka* refers to holding both hands above the head, fingers wide apart. The word refers to crying out for help, weeping, and proclaiming. With this gesture a person often proclaims his [or her] joy; hence, it is also called *yangalala*...[meaning] being ecstatic, exultant, joyous, [and] fine (as cited in Thompson 176). Fu-Kiau illustrates *Booka* and the “Vees” that occupy it on figure 6 below:

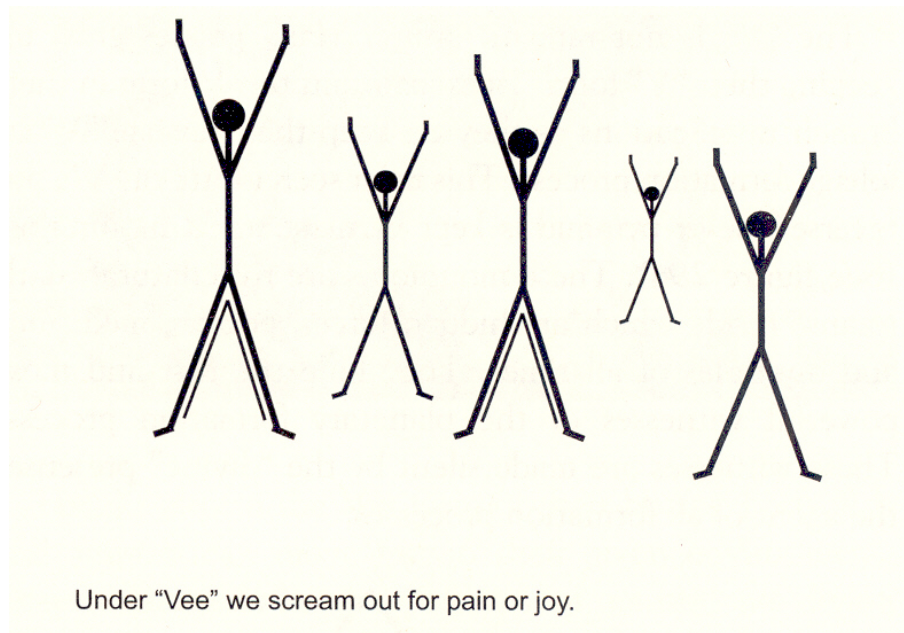


Figure 6. Another form of the "Vee" (145).

The picture is a familiar one that many have seen in situations of attention-grabbing, surrender, praise, affirmation, and resistance. In the words of one Mu-Kongo: "with this gesture, a person is sending up shimmering forces (*minienie*), positive forces from the ancestors to this world" (as qtd. in Thompson 177). The "Vee" of the legs is one form of non-verbal communication to the ancestors via the bio-spiritual rope of the community above the *kâlunga*. Its position suggests communication to those occupying the spiritual peak below the *kâlunga*. The ancestors can then channel their positive forces from the Musoni sun that the "Vee" of the open legs refers to through the Tukala sun that the "Vee" of the outstretched arms aim at, and communicate to this world through positive forces. William Stewart, an American linguist arranging a definitive dictionary of Afro-American speech, emphasizes the Afro-American character of this gesture: "it is not an aside; it is fundamental. I have rarely seen

whites engaged in this gesture, arms straight up, fingers wide spread. But I *have* seen it in Black America, Surinam, Brazil, and Senegal” (as qtd. in Thompson 177). In other words, Stewart suggests that this stance is unique to the African Diaspora. He also proposes that if the stance is seen in the European Diaspora, that it is a result of the reinterpretation and synthesis of the element from the cultures of African Diaspora, and not the retention of Europeanisms.

Kôngolese Ritual with Cosmographic⁸ Semblance

Here I will convey two Bakongo rituals that use and resemble the Bakongo cosmogram. Even though over time, improvisation, and acculturation the Bakongo cosmogram has adapted and also been merged with Christianity and Catholicism, the Bakongo cosmogram itself is unique to the Bakongo. “Long before the arrival of Europeans, this geometric statement, the Kongo Cruciform, adorned funerary objects and in other ways reflected Bakongo aesthetic perceptions of their relationship to the world” (Creel 53). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European Christian influence on the “BaKongo was marginal or non-existent except at certain centers of international trade, at San Salvador and on the coast” (Janzen and MacGaffey 32). Janzen and MacGaffey add to the notion of a Bakongo cosmographic origin and write that: “The cross was known to the BaKongo before the arrival of Europeans, and corresponds to the understanding in their minds of their relationship to their world” (Janzen and MacGaffey 34). The Bakongo cosmogram is an emblem that sums up the Bakongo’s understanding of their relationship to the world. There are many rituals that the Kôngolese engage in that carry direct similarity and comparable notions to that of the Bakongo cosmogram. This account will not cover all of the rituals, but will

⁸ Of or relating to the cosmogram and its visual, philosophic, and spiritual uses.

begin to describe two in particular: the oath and the burial. The account will convey both the cosmogram's function before North America and the symbolic streams—which will be discussed in the chapters to follow in greater detail—that were also shared by Bakongo descendants in North America. As a transition to the first ritual to be discussed, I will use a familiar concept from North American popular culture or experience - swearing on the Bible.

A Bakongo Oath

In North America the Bible is seen as sacred. The Bible has its own illustration of cosmogenesis in the book fittingly called Genesis. The words inside the Bible are believed to be God's words. Its words are used to communicate and as directions to communicate directly to God or by means of an intermediary, such as the Holy Spirit or Jesus. With this understanding, people take oaths upon the Bible, swearing the truth and nothing but the truth so help them. The Bakongo have a sacred document that symbolizes cosmogenesis that they also take oaths upon - the cosmogram.

Cornet and Thompson depict a ceremonial act that involves Bakongo people taking oaths upon something drawn in the ground and write:

In certain rites it [or the cosmogram] is written on the earth, and a person stands upon it to take an oath, or to signify that he or she understands the meaning of life as a process shared with the dead below the river or the sea—the real sources of earthly power and prestige, in Kongo thinking (28).

To take an oath on a cosmogram in the soil demonstrates that the oath-taker understands the circular lineage of life illustrated in the cosmogram that exteriorizes

the interconnectedness between the community, the terrestrial and submerged, the humans and the ancestors. Not only is the ground, which was created by God, sacred, but the cosmogram that was drawn in the ground is as well.

People only affirm oaths on elements that they consider sacred, such as the Bible or the grave of a recently deceased family member (“I swear on my mother’s grave”) or the cosmogram. Gomez demonstrates a reason why the cosmogram is sacred enough to take an oath upon and writes that, “To actually trace out the cosmogram in the ground while singing Kikongo words was believed to bring about the “descent of God’s power upon that very point” (as qtd. in Gomez 149). Once exteriorized and projected in song, the design of the cosmogram and the circular lineage it represents is commanding enough to bring the descent of God’s power upon it. This would expectantly wield the participants of this ceremony with God’s energies. “The main purpose of tracing the cosmogram on the earth in Kongo was to immerse oneself in larger spiritual dimensions” (Thompson 153).

A Bakongo Burial Ceremony

Burying a family member is an occasion where one would desire an immersion in larger spiritual dimensions. MacGaffey discusses a burial ritual where people perform the cosmogram as opposed to drawing it in the ground in his book *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo*. In this book he studies the village of Manza Manteke and finds how custom that had been influenced by missionaries, colonists, and anthropologists acts to protect local and rural self-government from government by the state. One custom he described in particular was one associated with the burial of Lina Lufumba.

Before a person is buried many things customarily take place such as the notification of family, observation of the deceased by all family members, incessant

sobbing and weeping, and libations to name a few. When a funeral was held for Lina Lufumba, there was a precise moment when something very similar to a ring shout was performed. At the head of her coffin sat the female representatives of the grandparental clans (or the family related by blood), and at the foot of her coffin sat the family members related by marriage (MacGaffey 159). MacGaffey writes more on this event:

Around them danced counterclockwise a second row of women, many carrying a tin rattle (*sungwa*), the woman's principal instrument. The songs and dancing continued most of the night to the sound of the drums, the *ngongi*, and the tin rattles of the women (159-160).

The counterclockwise circle around the coffin is indicative of the direction of the Bakongo cosmogram's four moments of the earth and its association with life and death. Considering that this is a funeral and there is a desire to connect with the deceased, one can see the importance of immersing one's self in a larger spiritual dimension. In this instance, however, the immersion does not take place by tracing a cosmogram on the ground, but through performing a cosmogram on the ground. The occasion suggests that the expression is a spiritual one and one that involves communication with the recently deceased through hetero-glossic means, or using the multiple texts of song and dance. MacGaffey continues, "The dance around the coffin is not restricted to women, but few men care to join in and it is distinctly the women's affair" (160). The women mainly play the role of the dancers and the men beat the drums that they dance to in this instance.

Chapter 2 Conclusions

The Bakongo people have a specific and flexible worldview that is

emblemized in the Bakongo cosmogram. This worldview affects the ways in which they carry out rituals such as, stating oaths and carrying out funerals. The fact that they use the Bakongo cosmogram during sacred moments is indicative of the important role that the ancestors play in their lives. If it were otherwise, burying their deceased would not be as big of an occasion as it is; the same importance can be said of stating oaths with the understanding that the one stating them is doing so bio-spiritually, communicating messages to the ancestors that deliver the messages to God.

When the Bakongo were first enslaved and traded by the Portuguese (1485-1487), then replaced the Dutch as leading traders in 1640, and then controlled by the French and the English toward the end of the 1600s, the worldview that they had cultivated for centuries did not disappear (Bobb xxi). However, on the Sea Islands they met with other Bakongo people from different regions and other ethnic groups from the Niger-Congo language family and were expectantly able to communicate with them. They communicated via spiritual worldview and language. Vass adds to this notion of African communicability and writes that, “Bantu-speaking slaves from Central Africa enjoyed a linguistic unity and ability to communicate with their fellow-captives...” (3). From differing moments of inter-group dialogue the Bakongo people’s worldview began to change form, possibly expanding, all the while maintaining its essential essence.

Even though the Bakongo were enslaved, shackles could not be put on their ancestors. This is a reality for them that acted as a source of hope and wisdom no matter what they were going through. Their ancestors were also a source of knowledge and memory that could not be forgotten. To take it one step further, if you will, even those Bakongo that jumped overboard to face the sharks, to be free, had a spiritual worldview that perceived the water (or the submerged) as the substance that contained the spirits and ancestors and because of this worldview had far less fear of

the ocean and even death.

Branches of Bakongo society were forcibly outstretched to the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. It was in the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands where the cultural flowers of the Bakongo continued to blossom, its fruits were harvested, and they began to spread seeds in the foreign soil of North America. It was in this foreign soil that its fruit continued to grow and to also change its original formation in order to survive in a new environment. Among the seeds that were spread of music, food, political views, and art was the seed of language. The language of the Bakongo, after several generations in the Sea Islands, tapered off, and their mother-Kikongo-tongue developed into Gullah. As a result, individual word use from Angola either persisted or stopped being used (Pollitzer 122). They used their Gullah language in order that their spiritual worldview⁹ persisted for generations to come. Shout songs are one way that they used their language and consequently retained their spiritual worldview.

⁹ A spiritual worldview is a view in which the creation of the universe and the process of life and death.

Chapter 3 – What You Shoutin(g) (A)bout?

“Africans are human and not a subspecies. They are therefore capable of skills, memories, the establishment of social order, etc. And therefore any physical dislocation that such people had to go through does not and did not create amnesia and forgetfulness” (Warner-Lewis)

-Maureen Warner-Lewis

Mbûngi a kânda va kati kwa nsi ye yulu. The center (cavity) of the community is located between the above and below world. The reality of the cultural heritage of a community, i.e., its knowledge, is the experience of that deepest knowledge found between the spiritualized ancestors and the physically living thinkers within the community (as qtd. in Fu-Kiau 112).

-Kôngolese Proverb

“...My grandmamma was raised on a reservation, my great grandmamma was from a plantation, they sung songs for inspiration, they sung songs for relaxation, they sung songs to take their minds up off that fucked up situation...”

-Mos Def

The songs that enslaved Africans sung as they were shouting in the ring shout are called shout songs. They used to be improvised more often, but are now increasingly formalized. I entitled the chapter “What You Shoutin(g) (A)bout?” in order to emphasize the curiosity I have in finding out what other elements are being sung about in the lyrical content of the shout songs that are less obvious. In this instance, I use shoutin(g) in reference to the content of the shout songs; I also use shoutin(g) to mean a loud expression of strong emotion. One of the ethnic groups that continue the tradition of the shout songs, as descendants of the enslaved Africans, is the Gullahs.

The inhabitants of the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands were referred to as the Gullahs (Stuckey 70). The online etymology dictionary states that, “...Early 19c. folk etymology made it [or Gullah] a shortening of *Angola* (homeland of many slaves) or traced it to a [West] African tribal group called the *Golas* [the name of an ethnic group of Liberia and Sierra Leone].” Although the legitimacy of folk etymology is questionable, the evidence held in Gullah spirituality and ritual of their origins is not.

“Upper Guinea peoples coming to [South] Carolina found a creolized black culture already adjusting and acculturating...” (Creel 44). The creolized Black culture that Creel writes about is the Gullahs. However, it is not as if this creolization was foreign enough to newly arrived enslaved Africans as to isolate them. Newly imported enslaved Africans had the ability to merge with the predominant Black culture in North America. In *Many thousands gone: the first two centuries of slavery in North America* Ira Berlin’s gives comprehensive consideration of the intricacies of race, ethnicity, and resistance and unity in North American slavery. He writes on the situation of the African encounter of creolized Black culture and writes that, “From a cultural perspective, the integration of Africans into the established African-American

life in the Lower South suggests how deeply African ways had already been incorporated into life in the quarter” (Berlin315). Not even the trauma of the middle passage jarred the Gullah enough to sever their African culture.

Despite the oppressive, restricting, and tyrannical nature of North American slavery, African cultures persisted. Blassingame agrees and adds that:

The mere existence of these cultural forms [or folk tales and secular songs] is proof that the rigors of bondage did not crush the slave’s creative energies...Not only did these cultural forms give the slave an area of life independent of his master’s control, they also were important psychological devices for repressing anger and projecting aggressions in ways that contributed to mental health, involved little physical threat and provided some form of recreation (Blassingame 129).

In the midst of these creative instincts and cultural forms that persisted was the spiritual belief of the Gullahs. The spiritual belief of the Gullahs is significantly emblemized in the Kôngo cosmogram and exteriorized in the ring shout they practiced. The Kôngo cosmogram’s cosmogrammar¹⁰ is seen in the shout songs of enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands and in the remainder of this chapter, I will illuminate what they were shoutin’ ‘bout. Sacred songs are largely reflections of religious concepts. Investigation of the shout songs will reveal religious concepts of the enslaved Gullahs and their descendants on the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands (Blassingame 145).

¹⁰ Cosmogrammar is the words consciously or unknowingly used to refer to the philosophy of the Kôngo cosmogram.

Still, before illuminating what the Gullahs and their descendants were shoutin' 'bout, it is important to highlight the (mis)naming of the various ethnic cultures that were enslaved in Africa and the importation of the (mis)named Africans to the ports of Georgia and South Carolina. This highlight will transition us from the rituals that were practiced by Bakongo people into the words that are sung by the Gullahs.

Generalization of the Bakongo

This short account of the generalization of the Bakongo will provide a basis for expanding the notions of the land that the Bakongo were enslaved in and taken from. It will discuss how the Bakongo were generalized by the Europeans that enslaved them, thus, making it nearly impossible to distinguish one ethnic group from the next.

The involuntary voyage of the transatlantic slave trade, if going to Charleston, South Carolina, could be more or less than 6800 miles or 5900 nautical miles for enslaved Africans (Infoplease.com). "During the process of their becoming a single people, Yorubas, Akans, Ibos, Angolans, and others [including the Kôngolese] were present on slave ships to America and experienced a common horror... As such, slave ships were the first real incubators of slave unity across cultural lines..." (Stuckey 3). In *Slave Religion*, Alfred J. Raboteau shares more detail about the documentation of these different ethnic groups during the Middle Passage and writes that, "Records of the slave ships mention points of embarkation but are often hazy about the original homelands of the human cargo [or ethnic groups]" (7). Cheryl Finley discusses this ethnic forgetting in the European's records by analyzing the history of the slave ship icon in her article "Committed to Memory: The Slave Ship Icon and the Black Atlantic Imagination." She recalls the architects of the image of the lower deck of the slave ship and writes that, "The plan of the slave ship was first developed as a broadside in December 1788 by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade at

Plymouth” (as cited in Finley 4). Finley investigates an origin of the ethnic forgetting of the Europeans and, as a result, the enslaved Africans, about the specific sites that the enslaved Africans came from and writes,

The generalizing nature of the written remarks of the 1789 London Committee broadside describe the captives depicted in the Brookes’ cargo hold simply as ‘Africans,’ a word that fails to indicate their specific ethnic or national origins, villages, and distinctive regions from which they were kidnapped, or the different languages they spoke. They were the people of the African diaspora: the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Mande, for example. Village elders, diviners, priests, doctors, blacksmiths, weavers, potters, and even nobility were indiscriminately forced into slavery (12).

In addition to families being separated and individuals being killed during the horrors of the Middle Passage, the reference to specific ethnic groups from the continent of Africa as African erased generations of genealogy. Raboteau adds more detail about the regions these various African ethnic groups came from and writes that:

A large percentage of American slaves came from West Africa and from the Congo-Angola region. This vast territory stretched along the coast from Senegambia in the northwest to Angola in the southeast; it extended several hundred miles inland, and embraced societies and cultures as diverse as those of the Mandinke, the Yoruba, the Ibo and the Bakongo” (7).

The vast territory referred to as the Congo-Angola region suggests that while enslaved

Africans were being involuntarily taken from their homelands, their homelands had not yet been demarcated in European terms.

African homelands had not been penetrated successfully by Europeans until the introduction of guns and European colonization of Africa in the late 19th century. Since the transatlantic slave trade to the Sea Islands preceded the Berlin conference¹¹ it must have been anywhere from difficult to impossible for Europeans to distinguish one culture from the next, which is another reason why the Yoruba, Ibo, and Bakongo that were imported to the ports of Georgia and South Carolina were generalized as Africans or Angolans, representative of the country of the port they were taken from.

Sea Island Slave Importation from Africa

To convey the significant Bakongo influence experienced by the Gullahs, it is important to discuss the Bakongo importation to the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands. The Bakongo's significant importation is how they were able to have such a cultural influence in isolated areas such as the Sea Islands.

The importation of enslaved Africans to Charleston, South Carolina took place between the early 18th and 19th centuries (Pollitzer 44-45). Importation of enslaved Africans to the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina preceded the Berlin conference. Their distinct ethnicity could not have been known because the traders largely labeled people according to the port they were taken from in Africa.

It is important to note that it was not only in South Carolina where a significant replenishing of African cultures persisted through direct importation of enslaved Africans; the ports of Georgia also had a significant, though comparatively lower,

¹¹ The Berlin Conference was a meeting of European powers between 1884 and 1885 that normalized trade in and European colonization of Africa.

direct importation of enslaved Africans, and thus, a replenishing of African cultures. Berlin concurs and writes that, “The peculiar pattern of the slave trade in the Lower South reinforced the effects of reaffricanization. Although Savanna and Georgetown developed an active direct trade with Africa, most slaves continued to enter the region through Charleston” (315).

The Gullah People and Their African Heritage by William S. Pollitzer is a comprehensive study that points out the reason for and the persistence of African culture in the Gullah culture in South Carolina. He does this by using linguistic and anthropological research, as well as many medical and population studies, and interviews and observations. Pollitzer compiles evidence from the time of the slave trade such as, naval office shipping lists, public state records, and newspaper advertisements. Integrating this evidence in Table 1, Pollitzer numerically illustrates the importation of enslaved Africans from three different periods of the transatlantic slave trade to Charleston, South Carolina.

According to these compiled documents, there were two major waves of slave importation from Central West Africa. In these two waves, there were significant numbers of enslaved Africans from the Angolan port that were imported directly to Charleston, South Carolina. The spans of these two waves include the early period (1716-1744) and the final period (1804-1807) of the transatlantic slave trade¹². The change in importation during the middle period was a result of the Angolan’s significant involvement in the Stono Rebellion and the fear that planters had

¹² The final period of the transatlantic slave trade should not to be understood as the final period of slavery, illegal importation of enslaved Africans, or the coastwise North American slave trade.

(Holloway 7). Early populations of Ovimbundu and Bakongo from the Congo-Angola region had time to synthesize their culture to the North American cultural landscape. However, as Creel contends in “*A Peculiar People*,” “Bakongo cultural antecedents did not smother the Upper Guinea contribution to African-American culture” (44).

Table 1. Estimate of enslaved Africans by origin and when they were imported into South Carolina (44-45).

Coastal Region	Cargoes with Count	Number of Slaves	Cargoes without Count	Number of Slaves Estimated ^b	Total Cargoes	Total Slaves Estimated	Percent of Subtotal with Others	Percent of Subtotal without Others
EARLY PERIOD, 1716–1744^a								
Senegambia	16	1,378	3	258	19	1,636	7.4	11.2
Sierra Leone	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Windward Coast	0.5	34	0	0	0.5	34	0.2	0.2
Gold Coast	4	407	2	204	6	611	2.8	4.2
Bight of Benin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bight of Biafra	5	1,043	0	0	5	1,043	4.7	7.1
Angola	45.5	10,169	5	1,117	50.5	11,286	51.0	77.2
Madagascar, Mozambique	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Others ^c	40	5,666	13	1,841	53	7,507	33.9	
SUBTOTAL	111	18,697	23	3,420	134	22,117	100.0	99.9
West Indies ^d	53	1,155	0	0	53	1,155		
TOTAL	164	19,852	23	3,420	187	23,272		
MIDDLE PERIOD, 1749–1787								
Senegambia	93	12,788	23	3,163	116	15,951	25.2	31.8
Sierra Leone	26	3,996	1	154	27	4,150	6.6	8.3
Windward Coast	58.5	9,669	5.5	909	64	10,578	16.7	21.1
Gold Coast	53	7,768	3.5	513	56.5	8,281	13.1	16.5
Bight of Benin	5	1,162	1	232	6	1,394	2.2	2.8
Bight of Biafra	3	396	1	132	4	528	0.8	1.0
Angola	36.5	8,742	2	479	38.5	9,221	14.6	18.4
Madagascar, Mozambique	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Others	59	10,043	18	3,064	77	13,107	20.7	
SUBTOTAL	334	54,564	55	8,646	389	63,210	99.9	99.9
West Indies ^d	134	5,450	1	41	135	5,491		
TOTAL	468	60,014	56	8,687	524	68,701		
FINAL PERIOD, 1804–1807								
Senegambia	4	253	4	253	8	506	1.7	1.9
Sierra Leone	8	1,229	1	154	9	1,383	4.7	5.1
Windward Coast	26	3,222	16.5	2,045	42.5	5,267	17.9	19.5
Gold Coast	16.5	2,422	6.5	954	23	3,376	11.4	12.5
Bight of Benin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bight of Biafra	2	732	0	0	2	732	2.5	2.7
Angola	51	14,192	4	1,113	55	15,305	52.0	56.6
Madagascar, Mozambique	2	473	0	0	2	473	1.6	1.7
Others	8.5	1,523	5	896	13.5	2,419	8.2	
SUBTOTAL	118	24,046	37	5,415	155	29,461	100.0	100.0
West Indies ^d	0	0	1	30	1	30		
TOTAL	118	24,046	38	5,445	156	29,491		
GRAND TOTAL	750	103,912	117	17,552	867	121,464		

Sources: E. Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute Publication No. 409, 1935). *Naval Office Shipping Lists for South Carolina, 1716–1767* (London: Public Records Office, 1966). *Records of the Public Treasurers of South Carolina 1725–1776*. (Columbia, S.C.: Department of Archives and History, 1969), coll. and ed., William S. Jenkins. *Records of the States: Book of Manifests, South Carolina, 1784, 1787, 1949*.

Notes:

^a Few slaves arrived in the intervals between these three time periods because of legal bans on trade.

^b The number of slaves in cargoes without count is calculated from the average of cargoes with a known count for that region and time period. Total slaves estimated is the sum of those known and those so calculated.

^c Others includes Africa, Guinea, and Unknown.

^d West Indies includes only those where an African provenience is unknown. It is a minimal estimate because of gaps in the records, the failure of some lists to include small numbers, and the occasional mixture of slaves from known and unknown sources, in addition to ships without any count.

In figure 7, Pollitzer compiles evidence from table 1 in order to illustrate origins of enslaved Africans throughout the entire span of the transatlantic slave trade imports to South Carolina:

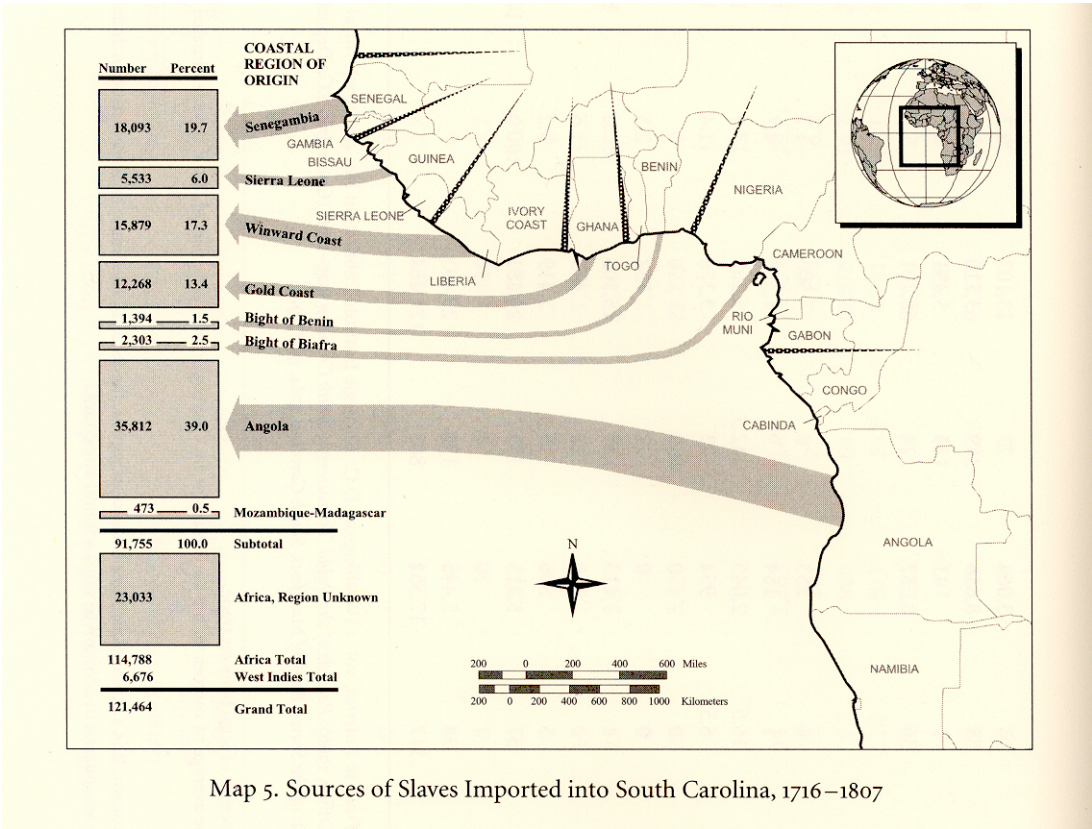


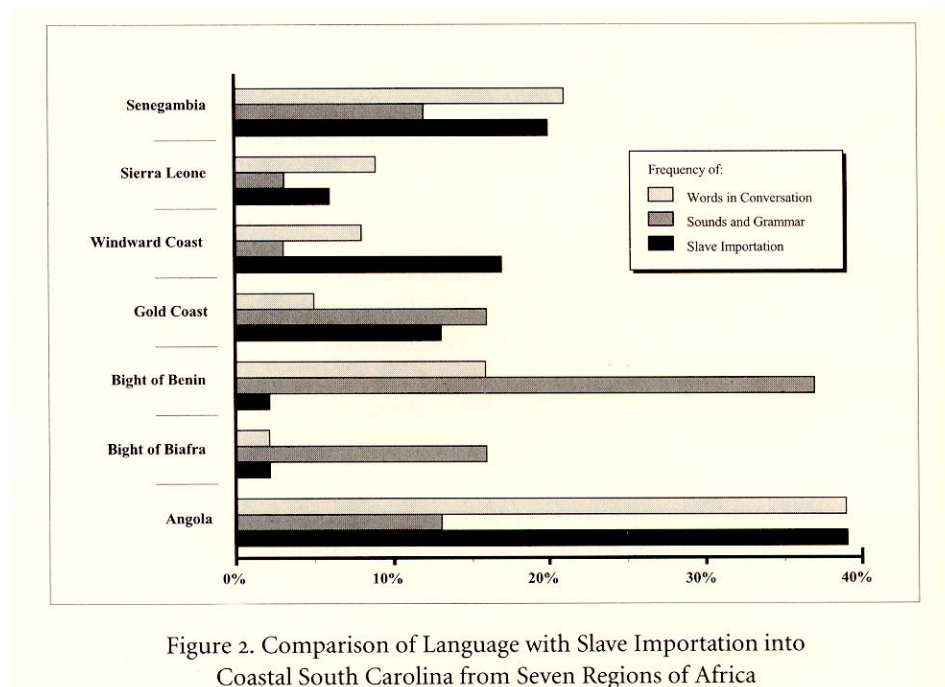
Figure 7. Sources of enslaved Africans imported into South Carolina between 1716-1807.

Figure 7 reports that a total of 39% of enslaved Africans imported into South Carolina were from the Angolan port. However, since the time span of enslaved African importation into South Carolina predates any carving of the African continent established at the Berlin conference (which began from an interest in the Kôngo), and many were enslaved from further inland of the Kôngo-Angola region and brought to the Angola port, the map of Angola must be considered more widely and to also

include the Kôngo and what is now the ironically named Democratic Republic of the Congo. This consideration must be made because the lines between the Kôngo and Angola were not clear-cut before European colonization. Also, the Bakongo occupy both Kôngo and Angola and their cultural overlap must be accounted for.

On table 2 below, Pollitzer uses a bar graph to further illustrate a correlation between the place South Carolina Gullahs were imported from and the words used by that population in North America:

Table 2. Comparison of Language with enslaved African importation into coastal South Carolina from seven regions of Africa.



It is unknown how such a small importation of enslaved Africans from the Bight of Benin could have had such a significant impact on the sounds and grammar of the language spoken on coastal South Carolina. Many elements must be accounted for,

including the context in which the sounds and grammar were used. However, the most direct word usages of any were those shared with Angolans. As a result, more than any other territory on the coast of South Carolina, the beliefs, cultures, and words of Angola were established, used early on, and occasionally replenished and reinforced by new populations of enslaved Africans from the Kôngo-Angola region. Stuckey concurs with the notion of African replenishing in South Carolina and writes, “That the trade continued illegally in South Carolina until the Civil War meant African cultural values were steadily being replenished” (43). The reinforcement and replenishing of an African population is all happening amidst the changing nature of their culture in a new landscape.

For these reasons, the span of land in which the Bakongo resided and continue to reside in Africa must be expanded beyond the imagination of contemporary national boundaries set by the French and Portuguese following the Berlin conference. Considering the vastness of the Congo-Angola region that the Bakongo and Ovimbundu occupied, it becomes more apparent how it is that influential numbers of them were imported directly into the ports of Savannah and Charleston, and how it is that elements from Bakongo spiritual worldview can persist in the new cultural landscapes enslaved Africans were forced into. These new cultural landscapes include, but are not exhaustive of, Haiti, Trinidad, Mississippi, New Orleans, LA, the Sea Islands of Florida, and for purposes of this paper: the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands. The Bakongo spiritual worldview is interlaced throughout the shout songs of the Gullahs.

Shout Songs of the Gullahs

By performing their spiritual beliefs through sacred songs, enslaved Gullahs and their descendants were able to collectively transcend their repressive

circumstance. Through shout songs they transcended their circumstance while being grounded in their cultural rituals and the realities of the song's lyrics. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* Lawrence Levine suggests that shout songs were a medium to reach out beyond the landscape that confined them (38). In *Shout Because You're Free* the shout songs are understood biblically, other times they are understood mundanely, but they are not interpreted cosmogrammatically. The shout songs that will be discussed in this chapter respectively include, "Watch that Star," "Blow Gabriel," and "Wade the Water to my Knees." They will be interpreted from the paradigms of Christianity and the Bakongo cosmogram.

A content analysis of the Shout Song "Watch that Star"

Lawrence McKiver¹³ sung "Watch that Star" in Bolden, GA on December 17, 1983 with the McIntosh County Shouters. He is a Gullah elder that is popular among recorded shouters. In an interview with McKiver on February 12, 1994 he insists that the chorus is an old shout song and he adds a verse to keep it practical for him. He adapted the gospel hymn, "Evening Shade," written by John Leland in 1835. The song reads like this:

Chorus (*sung solo*):

Oh, watch that star, see how it run

Watch that star, see how it run,

If the star run down in the western hills,

You oughtta watch that star, see how it run,

Leader:

¹³ Lawrence McKiver is Gullah and the lead songster of the McIntosh County Shouters (Buis and Rosenbaum ix).

Everybody–

Chorus (leader and basers)...

Chorus (leader and basers)...

Leader:

Well the days is past and gone

The evenin' shadow 'pear

Oh may we all remember well

The night of death drawin' near

Everybody–

Chorus (leader and basers)...

Leader:

Oh, members–

Chorus (leader and basers)...

Leader:

Well we lay or garment by,

Upon our bed to res';

Oh death will soon rob us all

Of what we have possess'

Everybody–...

(Rosenbaum 158-159).

This song illustrates the setting of the sun and associates the absence of it with death. The star McKiver is referring to when he sings, "Oh, watch that star, see how it run..." is the sun. When the sun is in the east, the earth is turning towards it and when it is in the west, the earth is turning away and the night is coming. This is why McKiver sings, "If the star run down in the western hills, You oughtta watch that star, see how it run..." because the night is characterized as a thief and one should keep their eyes

on the light if they desire to avoid getting robbed. He also suggests that the sun is running from something and it would seem to be the darkness, the thief in the night. Creel further suggests what this darkness is that McKiver sings of and writes that, “Even though they professed to believe that God ‘called’ his servants to heaven, death was still looked upon as an instrument of the powers of darkness” (312). Even though death is not darkness itself, death is one of darkness’s instruments. This is why McKiver suggests that you keep an eye on the sun setting.

When death comes, it is sweeping, and it takes whom and what it is supposed to. In the last stanza, death, being this thief, is what leaves only the external possessions, or garments of its victim behind. The body can be interpreted as the garment that is laid on the bed in this song since Christianity sees the flesh as a costume, if you will, that contains the spirit, the true self. However, this is also a view of the Bakongo. Bockie affirms this and writes, “It [the body] can be thought of as the prison within which the soul is temporarily restricted, the house within which it is lodged for a time, or as the suit of clothes which adorns a person for the moment” (Bockie 128-129). There is a subtle reference in this shout song to Job 24:14 and 1 Thessalonians 5:2 that both discuss, in their own way, this thief that comes in the night in order to kill the body that contains the soul.

Reading this shout song cosmogramatically reveals a moment in the Bakongo cosmogram’s four moments of the earth, the fourth moment when the earth is turning away from the sun and into darkness. At the point when the sun sets on the Bakongo cosmogram, one, at least symbolically, reaches death and enters below the *kâlunga* line into the submerged realm of the spirits and ancestors. The body is left behind and cannot follow the spirit below the *kâlunga* line. The shout song is highlighting this cosmographic transition of the fourth sun through the lyrical disguise of the angel of death referred to in the Bible.

It is also important that Lawrence McKiver is not simply warning about death, but also the spirits and the ancestors that manifest when the sun goes down, especially at midnight. Janzen and MacGaffey note the importance of midnight and write that, "...midnight, the 'still point' between one day and another...is also a point at which the living may confront the dead" (7). The confrontation can potentially be a peaceful one or a disturbing one depending on the attitudes of the spirits or ancestors and that of the person(s) confronting them. This is another cosmographic reason why Lawrence McKiver warns that we watch that star, see how it run.

A content analysis of the Shout Song "Blow Gabriel"

In the shout song "Blow, Gabriel," performed by McKiver and group on St. Simons Island, August 20, 1983, the leader of the ring shout would sing most of the lyrics and the basers would respond to his lines (Rosenbaum 110). The song briefly reads as follows (with the basers in parentheses):

Blow, Gabriel! (Judgment!) Blow that trumpet!
(Judgment bar!)
Calm and easy (Judgment) Tell everybody
(Judgment bar)
My God Say (Judgment) That They got to meet
(Judgment bar)
Oh blow, Gabriel (Judgment) Blow that trumpet
(Judgment bar)
Louder and louder (Judgment) Got to wake my people
(Judgment bar)
Wherever they be (Judgment) On lan' or sea
(Judgment bar)

Tell everybody (Judgment) My God say (Judgment bar)
That they got to be (Judgment) Louder and louder
(Judgment bar)
Gon' see my mother (Judgment) My father, too
(Judgment bar)
Blow, Gabriel (Judgment) Blow that trumpet
(Judgment bar)...(Rosenbaum 112).

The shout song recounts one of the seven unnamed angels that blow their trumpets to simultaneously announce and bring God's wrath, judgment, and resurrection upon the earth in the book of Revelations. One of these angels has been assumed to be the archangel Gabriel. "Gabriel is said to be the unnamed archangel in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, who sounds the trumpet of judgment and resurrection" (Guiley 70). This is the angel that blows the seventh trumpet, merging the kingdom of heaven with the kingdom of the world, and bringing judgment against the dead and rewarding those that served God (Revelations 11:15-18). Gabriel is known as the angel of revelation, wisdom, mercy, redemption, and promise (Guiley 69).

Reading this shout song cosmogramatically reveals that there are references to the terrestrial and submerged worlds, the ancestors, and the kâlunga line. Beginning with the reference to the terrestrial and submerged worlds, when McKiver sings, "Tell everybody (Judgment bar)...Got to wake my people (Judgment bar)...Wherever they be (Judgment)...On lan' or sea (Judgment bar)," he is acknowledging the two worlds. When he says "Got to wake my people," this is very important when one considers the community.

When McKiver sings, "Got to wake my people (Judgment Bar)," he is making reference to those people in the community on lan' and sea, the terrestrial and submerged worlds, that are asleep. He is not singing about regular sleep, but instead a

sleep that is associated with not paying attention, not being on purpose, and not knowing what time it is. “Sleep is the cousin of death” is a Kôngolese proverb that gives us insight into an alternate definition of sleep. This proverb suggests that those that are unaware are cousins with or close to death. McKiver, then, is making an appeal to Gabriel as the angel that announces important news about people’s purpose to wake his people with the trumpet, to give purpose to people in his community with no purpose.

McKiver continues, “...Gon’ see my mother (Judgment) My father too (Judgment bar),” making reference to his ancestors. It is not only a reference, but a longing to see his parents as well. Blassingame discusses this longing for family in observance of the striking characteristics of spirituals and writes, “... songs of this nature probably grew out of the slaves’ longing to be reunited with loved ones torn away from them by cruel masters (Blassingame 140)”. McKiver’s mother and father were a part of the community in McIntosh County, GA and are still, but their participation comes from the submerged world. McKiver is going to see his parents because when Gabriel blows his trumpet, he is going to merge the lan’ with the sea so that there is no kâlunga line separating the terrestrial and submerged.

To take the interpretation one step further, McKiver is also yearning for the reunification of his people with the motherland (and fatherland if you will), from which his lineage was torn. He uses the absence of the divide between land and sea to suggest that there will be no physical or spiritual barriers to repatriation with Africa. This is also a reference to freedom; calling into existence a freedom that does not exist yet.

There is further reference to the kâlunga line when McKiver sings, “Gon’ see my mother (Judgment) My father, too (Judgment bar).” McKiver is not simply talking about the moment when he dies and can be reunited with his parents in the submerged

world, but instead is singing about the situation where the kâlunga line separating him from his parents is no longer there. This suggests that Gabriel has the power to dissolve the kâlunga line so that there is no longer a separation between the two living worlds that can only be entered through the process we call death; which means that there would only be one world, the result of the synthesis of the terrestrial world with the submerged world.

The baser's words are very important when considering the synthesis of two religions that leads to their reinterpretation. Throughout the entire song, the cosmogrammar is inseparable from the biblical imagery. Without Gabriel's annunciation of the resurrection and judgment of the "dead" with the trumpet, the kâlunga line would have never been dissolved in order to acknowledge what happens with the merger of the terrestrial and submerged worlds. Bockie explains that the unique situation where the submerged and terrestrial worlds meet can be a point of synthesis between religious views and writes, "...since death brings everyone to a direct confrontation with the invisible spiritual world, it is the most critical point of contact between Christianity and traditional belief" (126). This shout song brings Christianity in contact with Bakongo belief by means of their frictions with the spiritual world. Reinterpreting the prophecy of resurrecting the dead in the book of Thessalonians and Revelations, the entire song, "Blow, Gabriel," is rhythmically interlaced with (Judgment) and (Judgment bar) between the cosmogrammar of McKiver and representative of the new inextricability of Christianity with the Bakongo cosmogram. Nevertheless, the Bakongo belief maintains a cultural hegemony¹⁴ with that of Christianity in order to thrive in a new environment.

¹⁴ Cultural hegemony is a dominant culture's means of adapting without sacrificing fundamental elements of its existence.

A content analysis of the Shout Song “Wade the Water to My Knees”

In the shout song “Wade the Water to My Knees,” sung by Lucille Holloway and group in Bolden, GA, September 5, 1981, there is a deep association with the water and death. Blassingame explains the content behind this song and writes, “Slave signs and omens focused primarily on the weather and death” (Blassingame 114). Holloway sings about the link between water and death (with the basers in parentheses):

I wade the water to my knees (I’m gon’ pray, gon’ pray)
Wade the water to my knees (I’m gon’ pray till I die)
Lord, the water’s so cold (I’m gon’ pray, gon’ pray)
Lord, the water’s so cold (I’m gon’ pray till I die)
I’m gon’ sink an’ never rise (I’m gon’ pray, gon’ pray)
I’m gon’ sink an’ never rise (I’m gon’ pray till I die)...
(Rosenbaum 116).

Holloway is articulating the feelings of death creeping into the body as the body goes cold. Her interaction with water as an allusion to death coincides with the Bakongo philosophy on the world of the dead. Cosmogrammatically speaking, the submerged or underwater world can only be experienced through death, the key to the door of the *kâlunga*. Creel explains more about this underwater world writing that:

In BaKongo religion, deceased ancestors became white creatures called *Bakulu*. They lived in the village of the dead, referred to as the land of all things white. This village was located under river beds and lakes. *Bakulu’s* white spiritual transparency allowed them to return to the world of the living undetected (319).

Water, in that case, is the home of the spirits. Holloway’s song, then, is expressing the

process of death, interacting with this underwater world.

What has changed from the cosmogrammatic interpretation that death is part of the circular lineage of life is Holloway's view that death is the point of no return. This is illustrated when Holloway sings, "I'm gon' sink an' never rise." Her assertion or fear that she will sink an' never rise is a result of the synthesis of the Bakongo cosmogram with Christianity and the Christian view that no one, until judgment day, will return from death, with the exception of Jesus. Creel gives insight into this moment and writes that: "...while the Gullahs' perception of life after death was essentially of Christian origin [hence going to heaven], many practices associated with the dying and the dead were derived from African antecedents [such as submersion or association with water]" (311).

Chapter 3 Conclusions

It can be said that the Congo-Angola region's enslaved cultures had a significant grand narrative from which to draw their philosophic religion, applied religion and understanding of the universe. Considering the ways in which Christianity's narrative was allowed inroads into the spiritual attitudes and beliefs of Gullahs that persist in North America to this day speaks to the resilience of their story. While converted to Christianity, upon taking a close and newly informed observation on the lyrics of the participants in the ring shout, the conversion did little to erase the memory or practice the Gullahs drew upon from their grand narrative. The reason why all of the shout songs chosen have double or triple entendre is due to the strength and dexterity of their stories against the stories imposed upon them. The strength and dexterity comes from a couple of advantages: The hegemonic ability to have many faces behind one mask and the ability to use a body as a text that holds and transmits cultural information.

The first advantage that the Gullahs used was having many faces behind one mask. Enslaved Gullahs were largely allowed to be Christian, but not “heathen,” as in their traditional “savage” religion. From a survival point of view, this meant that Gullahs had to reinterpret the Christian stories in order that their own stories be heard and passed down among them, while the master’s story was also heard by him. Blassingame finds similarly when analyzing slave spirituals of the United States and writes, “Rejecting literal interpretations of these [biblical] passages, the slaves altered them, appropriating those symbols corresponding closely with their own situation” (145). They appropriated the mask of Christianity while the faces behind the mask persisted to be that of the Bakongo, Ovimbundu, and Yoruba.

Bockie’s discussion of the Manianga Christians supplementing their traditional beliefs with Christianity is similar to the reality of many Bakongo and Gullah Christians today. He writes that, “Two modes of belief exist side by side and are assigned to different aspects of an individual’s life, resulting in a dual outlook” (Bockie 138). Creel concurs with this notion and adds that:

...while Gullahs turned gratefully to the Christian God, whom they regarded as a warm, personal friend, this did not prevent them from retaining some of their ingrained customs and beliefs, as is observed in their attitudes toward life, death and the supernatural (321).

In other words, the Gullahs did not have to completely sacrifice their cosmology and spiritual worldview for Christianity. Increasingly, they were able to carry their spiritual notions while those of Christianity’s were appended. This ability resulted in a dual outlook favoring their perspective and that of their descendants. In addition to a dual outlook, a *new* outlook is accomplished.

Since the faces behind the mask are necessary for it to be worn, the synthesis

of the mask with the many faces was inevitable and, as was found, creates many new spiritual possibilities for the Gullahs. New spiritual possibilities in the shout songs discussed include the merger of the biological world with the spiritual world, the merger of the enslaved Africans and their descendants on the Gullah Sea Islands with the land of the African continent from which they were torn, water simultaneously being representative of the realm of spirits and the point of no return, and the angel of death being the fourth moment of the earth.

Wearing the mask of Christianity preserved the faces and cultures behind it, thus functioning as a type of hegemonic resistance¹⁵. Pollitzer historicizes the mask and writes that, “Outwardly, it was a Christian service, but the pageantry and meaning were echoes from the centuries-old practices of the Windward Coast, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Congo” (as cited in 140). Stuckey adds to this notion of the mask and writes, “Christianity provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative” (35). The “protective exterior” of Christianity did allow the Gullahs to maintain dialogue with their ancestors and God via their ancestors while living in a Christian dominated society. This ancestral dialogue and attitude towards life is demonstrated as McKiver sings about seeing his mother and father. Also, the cosmographic understanding of the submerged realm as that of the dead or the spirits and ancestors persisted and was passed to many generations by using the image of a setting sun or the angel of death in song. The second advantage of using the body as a text will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

¹⁵ Hegemonic resistance is the resistance exerted from a dominant group that compromises only the elements that do not obstruct its ever-changing world-view being preserved.

Chapter 4 – Blinded by White Pages

“But why, why (I ask) do we long over a fragment of Nietzsche (most beautiful of philosophers), or a sentence of Faulkner (most impenetrable of novelists) while the inevitability of these natural texts surround us (unseen) in every niche of cultural concern?”

-Richard Poulsen

“The body is a great poem”

-Wallace Stevens

“A text is never complete until it is performed”

-Micere Githae Mugo

In a society obsessed with writing, reading writing, and deeming those that cannot read the writing as illiterate, we fail to realize the scope of literacy. The white pages we write on and read blind us from the natural text on which those pages reflect on. This has a lot of importance in what we consider text. In Richard C. Poulsen’s *The Body as Text In a Perpetual Age of Non-Reason* he writes about the rationale and difficulty of reading the body as text. He shares a story from a book of Claude Lévi Strauss that helps to understand the wider scope of literacy and text that exists. Here Strauss attempted to teach writing to the Nambikwara, an Amazonian Amerindian ethnic group with no written language. The Nambikwara were lost in scribbling and indecipherable wavy lines in their attempt at imitating his words. However, Strauss was later lost in the wilderness of that area of Brazil and did not know how to return to

the Nambikwara. He was just about to start a bush fire, probably to call attention to himself, until he heard the voices of the Nambikwara that had been reading his trail since he got lost in order to retrieve him (Poulsen 37). This literate man could read novels and essays, but could not read the text of the bush to save his life. He could not read the subtleties of the shuffled leaves he disturbed, or the rhythm of his steps imprinted in the soil, and even the differences in the elevation of the bush. Strauss was suddenly illiterate. The story widens the possibilities of those we classify as literate and also what can be read.

If native Brazilians can read the earth, then enslaved Africans and their descendants can read the body. It is also reasonable, then, that the shouting of the shouters can be read as text, or performed text and that within the ring shout is an expansive visual vocabulary.

To read the shouting is optional. The ring shout will go on with or without my natural or informed reading of it. Poulsen writes about the necessity of reading certain texts in his second chapter in a story about the hunter reading the tracks of the hunted and writes that:

By themselves. They [or the tracks of the hunted] invite a reading, but can rest in peace if they don't get it. Their oblivion is non-librarial. I mean, they imply no rational expectation. The natural text simply is: its reader, the natural reader, comes to them for survival, the survival of understanding (34).

Shouting has meaning for the insiders who engage in it with or without an outsider's acknowledgement or reading of it. They do not need hundreds of pages to transmit their information. Their songs, and especially their bodies, transmit an abundance of information to their community. In this case the shoutings of the shouters are read in

order to preserve a clearer understanding of what is happening in them according to a mundane, Protestant Christian, and most importantly, a cosmographic perspective. Before I begin to read the shouter's bodies, it is important to describe shouting in more detail than the introduction.

Shouting is different from the shout songs, in that there is more of an emphasis on the movement of the body than the content, melody, and rhythm of the song. Buis and Rosenbaum further elaborate on this theme and write that:

Like their slave ancestors, today's shouters apply the term "shout" specifically to the movements rather than to the vocal or accompanying percussive components of the shout tradition, and distinguish between shouters—those who step and move in the ring—and the singers, basers, and stickers (3).

A new direction that shouting has taken since it was brought to North America is that shouting is to be understood as a specific counterclockwise shuffle aimed at praising God and giving thanks, not a dance that does the same. In the words of Deacon James Cook from McIntosh County:

if you cross your feet you were turned out of the church
because you were doing something for the devil....So
you see those ladies didn't cross their feet, they shouted!
And shouting is...praising God with an order of
thanksgiving" (as cited in Rosenbaum 3).

Crossing legs is dancing and dancing is not only considered as not shouting, but is sinful. This notion was not always the case. Stuckey concurs and writes, "...what at first appears secular was from the African vantage point sacred, the influence of Christianity coloring the retrospective view..." (66). Synthesis of Bakongo

spirituality with Christian Protestantism has led to a certain type of cultural rejection in enslaved Africans and their descendants. Stuckey writes, “That whites considered dance sinful resulted in cultural polarization of the sharpest kind since dance was to the African a means of establishing contact with the ancestors and with the gods [and indirectly God]” (25). This cultural polarization is one of the consequences of intersecting traditional African religious cosmology with biblical tradition. In *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* Hawes and Jones discuss the cultural polarization of enslaved Africans in this regard and state:

Dance [in the rural community of enslaved Africans] has had a lot of controversy because of the dialectic between African cultural patterns, in which dance is paramount to many aspects of human activity, and European Protestantism, in which dance is largely considered worldly and potentially lustful (102).

For the enslaved African, there was nothing wrong with dance and it was largely inseparable from and essential to everyday life. For the European Protestant, dance was largely “primitive,” selfish, meaningless, and not of God. Hawes and Jones later suggest the junction at which this cultural conflict between Africans and European Protestants occurred:

[The ring shout] represents a cultural compromise between two groups: Afro-Americans, who felt that it was right and proper to dance before the Lord, and descendants of Calvinism—one of the more radical branches of Protestantism—, who regarded any kind of earthbound joys, especially dance, as sinful (143).

Enslaved Africans, especially their descendants, made a decision to label dance, which

they viewed as sacred, as secular. However, the cultural compromise entails no significant change in what the shout represents, what the shout is, and what the descendants of Calvinism desired. Hawes and Jones assert, “The shout, by its emphasis on observance of form and rule, came *outside the concept of dance* for both groups [Calvinists and Africans]” (Hawes and Jones 143). Even though the perspective of dancing as sinful is a new direction for the descendants of enslaved Africans, traditionally and historically, the shout was never the same as dancing and is distinguished for its specific structure pertaining to certain rituals, such as honoring, remembering, and communicating with the ancestors and bringing in the New Year.

However, similar to the shout songs, the shout has become more formalized over time. From the example of the Bakongo burial ceremony, people danced in a counterclockwise circle, what I would consider as the ring shout. That it is a dance is all that MacGaffey conveys pertaining to the ceremonial Bakongo dance. He does not emphasize a particular shuffling of the feet, swaying of the hips, or placement of the hands. His description suggests that early on in the ring shout’s lineage to dance counterclockwise was enough. Also, that it was a dance was not a sin or an issue.

Before reading the shout, some fundamental challenges must be discussed. It must be understood that to read shouting via a short video loses a lot of meaning in translation in comparison to being a participant in the shout and reflecting on that participation. This is because the presence of the camera recording the actions of the watch night taking place in McIntosh County, GA, introduces another lens that is normally absent from the cultural landscape. Due to the presence of the camera, the shouters are unavoidably doing more of a performance as opposed to the celebration they are used to. Nonetheless, with this in mind, the video does open an opportunity for those that cannot be in McIntosh County, GA for a watch night to see the ring shout in action. This allows for a kinetic reading that could not have been done with

the shout songs on the page.

The “Vee” that was discussed in the second chapter is visible in the movements of the shouters during the shout song “Move, Daniel.” The performance of the song *Eve and Adam* also has many “Vees” in it and becomes increasingly powerful with this added reading of the performed story about the fall of man.

Let us begin with the shout song “Move, Daniel.” Another version of the song recorded by Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes is similar to the one sung by the McIntosh County shouters. The version from the McIntosh County shouters goes:

Leader:

Move, Daniel, move, Daniel,

Move, Daniel, move

Basers:

Daniel.

Leader:

Move, Daniel, move

Basers:

Daniel.

Chorus (leader and basers):

Oh, Lord, pray sinner, come,

Oh, Lord, sinner gone to hell.

(similarly)

Move, Daniel, move, Daniel

Move, Daniel, move, Daniel

Go the other way, Daniel

Go the other way, Daniel.

Rock, Daniel, rock, Daniel

Rock, Daniel, rock, Daniel.

Shout, Daniel, shout, Daniel

Shout, Daniel, shout, Daniel.

(chorus)

Move, Daniel, move, Daniel

Move, Daniel, move, Daniel

Go the other way, Daniel

Go the other way, Daniel.

Sinner in the way, Lord

Sinner in the way, Lord...

(Rosenbaum 123-124).

To someone reading the lyrics by themselves, one might assume that the shouters are metaphorically giving commands to the Daniel of the Bible, but that is not the case. What is happening in this song is far less biblical and instead a much more mundane part of the slavery culture. Lawrence McKiver gives his understanding of what is occurring in this song and says in an interview with Art Rosenbaum:

See, Daniel was...[an enslaved African], and
the...[enslaved Africans] all were havin' a little party
across the field one day. And the smoke-house was up

there—we call it the smoke-house, the place that the old boss keep all his meat. And they wanted to steal some of the meat, you know, and they send Daniel [the faster and leaner of them] in to get a piece of meat so they could put the party on sure enough! And old boss was coming down through there, so the...[enslaved] going to sing a song to let Daniel know to get out the way...so that old boss wouldn't put that whip-lash on him (Rosenbaum 122-123).

Daniel is a part of the enslaved community and attempting to “steal” from his captors in order to feed his family. It is reasonable to imagine that the name Daniel was made up. “Daniel” could have been a Biblical mask that enslaved Africans used to cloak the name of the “Robin Hood” they gave directions to in order to fool the “old boss” into thinking that they were singing about the Bible again. This is reasonable because Jones and Lomax documented a different, but similar, shout song about Daniel without the secular reference McKiver gave.

It is possible, but unlikely, that different communities of enslaved Africans have someone that is naturally named Daniel that happens to be the leanest and quickest in their respective communities that they separately created a shout song about. However, it is more likely that Daniel was an alternate name for the person “stealing” from the Whites to give to the Africans. In order to accomplish this, the community hid Daniel's identity behind the mask of Biblical imagery. His real name could have been Lawrence McKiver, but while he was getting that pork, it was Daniel.

In addition to a celebration of a past event, this shout song is also indicative of the cultural memory of enslaved Africans and how it survived and was preserved through their descendants, not only through lyrics, but also, the body and the ways in

which they chose to move it. If it is reasonable that the song, “Move, Daniel,” continued to be performed in order to preserve the memory and story of those who put their backs on the line for the enslaved community to acquire the forbidden meat of the “old boss,” then it is also reasonable that enslaved Africans preserved cosmographic visual and philosophic streams through analogous means: song, their bodies, and the movement of their bodies, so that the story and meaning could survive to this day.

Cosmographic visual and philosophy were passed on to many generations through the body. Poulsen defines what the body is and writes, “The body is consciousness—perhaps, above all, a cultural reflection—or a reflection of the varied faces of a culture. A text reflects a reader. And, I suppose a reader reflects a text. I mean, bodies wear images into that *eye of the mind*” (5). The way the body is read when it moves or stands motionless determines the reader that in turn determines what (the page of) the body is. To be specific, the enslaved African’s body reflects her culture and slavery society. Anything that is done to an enslaved African’s body directly affects her consciousness. Anything that an enslaved African does with her body is an action of her consciousness. In turn, her action affects the consciousness of the reader of her body. For this reason, when Poulsen defines the body as consciousness, it is not only imaginable, but also applicable.

***The Shouter’s Body as Text & Consciousness of the Bakongo Cosmogram in
“Move Daniel”***

Here I read the body as one would read the mind. I read the body as a site of consciousness. With consciousness comes memory; and I will also examine how memory functioned through the body. The fact that I am reading the body asserts its status as text. The text of the shouters conveys many messages, some historical, and

some spiritual. This account will describe some of those messages.

The following is what was read from two differing occurrences of “Move, Daniel,” beginning with the first occurrence from the film *Down Yonder: Shouters, young and old, shuffle counterclockwise in a circle while Lawrence McKiver leads the song with the Sticker*¹⁶ Benjamin Reed. *There are only women and girls wearing various types of clothing shouting in this song. Six out of eight of the women have their hands on their hips. This calls attention to the hips; which move quickly left and right, reacting to the shuffling of the feet and to the rhythm of the Sticker on the wooden surface.*

Interpreting this shout cosmographically, Benjamin Reed’s vertical broomstick beats the terrestrial surface. His rhythm and vibration not only catches the senses of the humans, but of the ancestors and spirits as well. The vibrations reach “Daniel” as much as they do the pastor and his wife sitting to the side smiling. These vibrations move to a rhythm that the community is used to, and thus, call for specific community ritual and cultural memory. Lawrence McKiver’s cultural memory remembers Daniel in song, but the women and girls who shout remember Daniel in song and movement of their bodies. The women’s and girl’s hands are noticeably and purposefully on their hips.

The women with hands on their hips hold significance in Kôngolese culture. Holloway explains part of this significance and writes that: “In Kongo, placing the left hand on the hip is believed to press down all evil...” (Holloway 161). In addition, with their hands on their hips, the vertexes of the women’s arms form “Vees” that point to the sunrise and sunset, the directions on the cosmogram of those being born

¹⁶ The sticker is the person responsible for hitting the broomstick on the floor for the foundational rhythm of the ring shout.

into the spiritual world and the physical world. This suggests that the shout is aimed at those “Daniels” being born into the physical and the spiritual realms. Once they complete a full counterclockwise circle, their “Vees” have traveled the full length of the cosmogram. This suggests that the shout is also aimed at those “Daniels” at their physical and spiritual peak. The “Vees” of the shouter’s arms suggest that the shouters are communicating with Daniel wherever he may be on the cosmogram.

The second occurrence of the song “Move Daniel” happened not too much later in *Down Yonder* and read: *Later all of the women of the McIntosh County shouters gather, each wearing a long dress that is green meshed with white and bonnets on their heads. The circle they shuffle into begins clockwise, but ends counterclockwise. The leader—or Lawrence McKiver here—would tell Daniel what to do and the shouters would follow his directions. He would sing and the basers would follow in parentheses: Do the Eagle Wing (Daniel). The shouters would flap their arms in the front and to the sides of them like Eagles. McKiver sings: Go the other way (Daniel). Women would follow, shuffling in place in a counterclockwise motion. Varying the motion, McKiver sings: Rock Daniel Rock (Daniel). Following instruction, the female shouters vigorously shout and move their hips. Changing the motion to the basic shout, McKiver sings: Shout Daniel shout (Daniel).*

In these brief readings of “Move, Daniel,” Daniel is no longer there physically. Daniel is now an ancestor or type of ancestor. This shouting, in turn, is acknowledging Daniel through the cultural memory of what he did for the enslaved community. The shout also honors God through the community’s acknowledgement of ancestors. Buis and Rosenbaum concur that this is true and write, “They [contemporary shouters of Bolden] do clearly regard the shout as a way of honoring God and of evoking at the very least thoughts of departed ancestors...” (21). The consciousness of this event about Daniel is recalled not only through the shout song,

but is retained and (re)emphasized in the body movements of the shouters, such as the “Eagle Wing,” “Rock,” and “Go the other way.”

The body movements of the shouters are movements that Daniel may have engaged in while attempting not to get caught by the “old boss.” The shouting became a medium through which shouters could participate in historic actions (Levine 38). For example, McKiver would sing to Daniel, “Do the eagle wing” and the basers would quickly follow with, “Daniel,” and the shouters would then change the positioning of their arms from their hips to the sky in order to mimic the flying of an eagle. McKiver would later sing “Rock Daniel rock” and the basers would quickly follow with, “Daniel,” and with their hands on their hips, the shouters would violently rock their hips left and right. Figure 8 on the following page gives an idea as to the spirit and formation of the “Eagle Wing”:

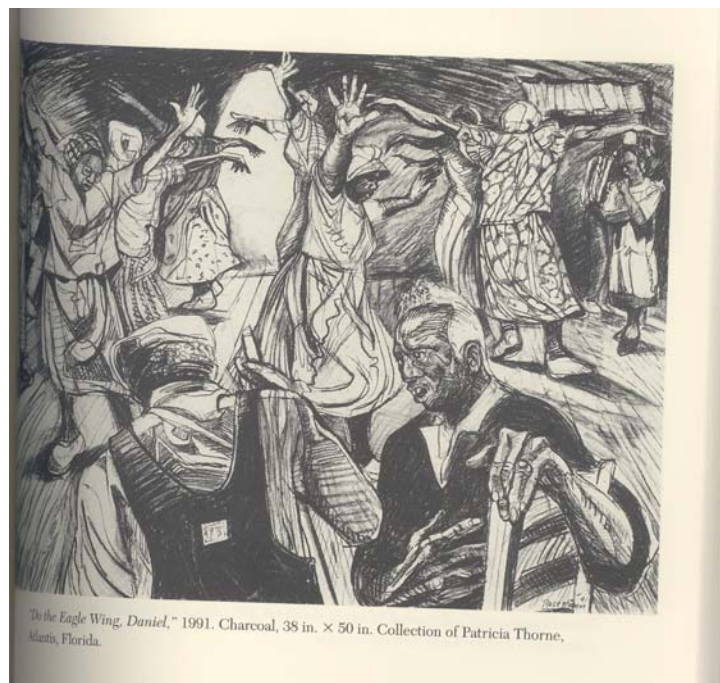


Figure 8. Charcoal drawing of Shouters doing the “Eagle Wing” by Art Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum).

The Bakongo cosmogram is sacred art and art is text. Using their bodies as text, the shouters in figure 8 manifest the Bakongo cosmogram's circular formation in three-dimensional form. They act out the direction of the Bakongo cosmogram through shouting. The hardwood floor that they are shouting on is representative of the *kâlunga*. Their shouting, then, is the bio-spiritual communication that occurs through the vertical plane (or the bio-spiritual rope). By manifesting the Bakongo cosmogram through their collective bodies, the shouters also become sacred text. Through their shouting, the McIntosh County shouters have perpetuated the story of Daniel through their bodies. Music, sound, and dance carry strong importance in the ring shout and consequently, the Bakongo cosmogram.

In this brief reading of *Down Yonder*, a silence in the sacred art of the Bakongo cosmogram can be realized—the virtual lapses of music, sound, and dance. The emblem of the cosmogram and the majority of its descriptions do not suggest the sound, music, or the dance that is a crucial element of bio-spiritual communication and that exists throughout the cosmogram and the rituals associated with it. One exception is the wave that emanates from the virtual cosmogram Fu-Kiau discusses in *Tying The Spiritual Knot: African Cosmology of the Bântu-Kôngo*. The silence of the bio-spiritual communication that occurs in the cosmogram and the shout songs is filled with rhythm, song, and shouting when watching and hearing the ring shout in the film.

***The Shouter's Body as Text and Consciousness of the Bakongo Cosmogram in
"Eve and Adam"***

Here I read the body of the shouters again. I read their bodies cosmographically. By doing this, I decipher a spiritual worldview that the shouters have coded with their bodies.

The shout song "Eve and Adam" also received a lot of attention in *Down*

Yonder, and, as we will find, for good reason. The following was read in the shout song “Eve and Adam” from the film *Down Yonder*: *The pulsating rhythm of the Sticker in the ring shout is virtually irresistible to move to, especially to shout to if one knows how. The rhythm went: 1 (silent 2) 3 4. Even I cannot help but to move my shoulders and hips while I watch the video. Oneitha Ellison of the McIntosh Shouters concurs and says, “When you start singin’ dem songs, you can’t help from shoutin’. You got to get it all ova you. You be shoutin’. All in ya foot. You got to be doin’ some kinda motion ‘cause you can’t be still.”*

Doretha Skipper, an older looking lady of the gathering, moves her body in haste almost jumping from one place to another within the circle as she rolls her fists around each other in a reaching out motion, while staying near her abdomen. Her excitement exudes a triple-entendre of happiness, embarrassment, and an emotion I could only know from being there. Sister Skipper exudes happiness from youthfully hopping around the inner-circle. She expresses embarrassment due to the context of the song, the loss of man’s innocence. She continues in her standing, yet crouched, position, mimicking picking up the leaves that Adam and Eve used to cover their nakedness, embarrassment, and guilt.

Either another woman realized that she was naked too or she felt the spirit to join the inner-circle, but she joins, standing, yet crouched as well. She performs a similar reaching out motion with her arms, but she does it differently with more emphasis on reaching out than pulling in. Both women are almost running in place, or in circles within the circle, when another woman joins the inner-circle. She holds her dress out and uses her other arm to reach out and pull in the leaves, appearing to place the leaves in the dress. Then, a man enters, virtually clawing in at the space in front of him while everyone moves to the same rhythm. He claws as if making up for joining the circle so late.

Again, even though this song is about men and women, the men are the main ones creating the rhythm and singing on the outer-circle of the ring shout, while the women are dancing on the inner-circle. This occurrence is very similar to the Bakongo burial ritual where the man drummed, but the women of the deceased family member were the only ones dancing. The crouched position of the dancers symbolizes Adam and Eve's new identity as being less than they once were. If, as will be discussed later, to stand vertically in the middle of the ring shout is to be "like" God, then to crouch is to be like less than God.

Below, Figure 9, though not drawn from the ring shout described above, illustrates some of the energy and spirit that is involved in the song "Eve and Adam" that I witnessed on video. Figure 9 captures a perceived moment and should not be interpreted as to encompass the entire event:



Figure 9. Charcoal drawing of "Pickin' Up Leaves" by Art Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum).

Listening to the words of the song, Eve and Adam are pickin' up the leaves. Reading

the actions of the video, everyone picks up leaves differently while shouting on. In the circle that surrounds the shouting, mostly everyone is nodding their heads as if in affirmation of the rhythm, the words being spoken, and the actions being performed. All the while, biblically it appears as though the shouters and singers are celebrating and re-telling the story of Eve and Adam. However, there is more going on cosmographically than it appears.

It is important that one understands the significance of “Eve and Adam” to begin a conversation about what is happening cosmographically in the shout. Bockie suggests the significance of “Eve and Adam” and writes that, “To become an ancestor means to regain the status that the first man lost” (Bockie 132). The status the first man lost was innocence and is epitomized by the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible. To regain the status the first man lost, one must travel the circular lineage of the Bakongo cosmogram. In other words, by becoming an ancestor, one no longer has to pick up leaves or is ashamed of her or his nakedness, her or his being. The participants of the ring shout are expressing consciousness of the pathway to regaining innocence lost through their bodies. Gaining innocence lost, specifically through the body, takes on a different significance considering that the Gullah’s ancestors were enslaved Africans. If there is knowledge of a rape or sodomy of an ancestor, it is knowledge that most would rather cover up like nakedness with clothing. To become an ancestor is to not be ashamed of or involved in placating a painful past.

Importantly, the shouters are occupying the middle of the circle. The middle of the circle is the vertex of the crossroads. It is also the intersecting point between the spirit world and the terrestrial world. The following section will describe the significance of this moment.

***The Shouter's Body's Text and Consciousness as a site for Syncretism between
Yoruba and Bakongo***

In this subsection, I will demonstrate how it is that the shouter's bodies form a certain text, that of the crossroads. Then, I will reveal how that text is a basis for syncretism between different African ethnic groups. Lastly, I will show how that syncretism complicates and expands the meaning of the ring shout.

When the Gullahs stand or sit upright to engage in the ring shout it is cosmographically significant. Whenever the *kâlunga* meets with the bio-spiritual, a crossroads is created, a virtual crossroads, which is also represented directly by an African deity. Even though many Bakongo, and even their descendants in South Carolina and Georgia, focus on *nkixi*¹⁷ as opposed to a pantheon of deities, the Yoruba did focus on a pantheon of deities. Gomez, who suggests more of a Bakongo influence on the ring shout, writes that:

In the case of South Carolina and Georgia, it is clear that West Central Africans were the dominant group...These beliefs were expressed most clearly in the area of religion, in which the West Central African use of ring ceremonies was the main source for the development of the ring shout... (152).

To add to what Gomez stated, I suggest that there are gray areas where other numerically significant ethnic groups, such as the Yoruba, append their views with that of the Bakongo. These attachments further complicate and expand the scope of what the Bakongo cosmogram means. The Yoruba (occupying Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria) also experienced significant direct importation to the Georgian and South Carolinian Sea Islands. The Yoruba's importation rate to South Carolina was the

¹⁷ Nkixi is one medicinal charm or a series of medicinal charms.

highest during the middle period of the transatlantic slave trade (refer to Table 1 in Chapter 3). Due to their importation directly to South Carolina it is reasonable that their views found ways to meld with that of the Bakongo while preserving some fundamental Yoruba perspectives. Leland G. Ferguson notes this melding point in his essay concerning cosmograms found at the bottom of bowls in South Carolina and writes that:

the basic features of the cosmogram—the crossroad and an underworld beneath the water—which were commonly held ideals all along the coast of West and Central Africa...would have been potential points of syncretism for the variety of people enslaved in the low country of South Carolina (Singleton 127).

One point of syncretism between the Yoruba and the Bakongo is the crossroads.

A Yoruba coming into contact with the ring shout might interpret the virtual crossroads created as the Orisha¹⁸. Raboteau explains that: "...crossroads are pointed out as especially strong places for working magic" (34). Just as magic is used to make things happen, so is Esu-Elegba, who also embodies magic. Raboteau warns that: "It should be emphasized that it is the continuity of perspective that is significant, more so than the fact that the cults of particular African gods, such as Shango or Elegba, have been transmitted to the New World" (16). Even though the particularity of everything that the Yoruba practiced in their religion is not present in the ring shout, the perspective of the Yoruba deity Esu-Elegba is important to understanding the complexity of the ring shout and the Bakongo cosmogram in the North American context.

¹⁸ An Orisha is a spirit that is a part of and a reflection of the almighty God Olodumare in Yoruba—Esu-Elegba.

In *Flash of the Spirit* Thompson discusses Esu-Elegba (which can be spelled many different ways) as being one that was given the treasure of àshe (which can also be spelled many different ways)—the force to make all things happen and multiply, by God (18). Gates further describes àshe and writes that: “Yoruba sculptures of Esu almost always include a calabash that he holds in his hands. In this calabash he keeps *ase*, the very *ase* with which Olodumare, the supreme deity of the Yoruba, created the universe” (Gates 7). Thompson continues his discourse on Eshu-Elegba and shares that:

Eshu consequently came to be regarded as the very embodiment of the crossroads. Eshu-Elegbara is also the messenger of the gods, not only carrying sacrifices, deposited at crucial points of intersection, to the goddesses and to the gods, but sometimes bearing the crossroads to us in verbal form, in messages that test our wisdom and compassion (Thompson 19).

By using àshe, which can reasonably be interpreted as magic and/or words, Eshu makes things happen, which causes other things to happen and the cycle perpetuates. In many senses, Esu is text, and texts guard the pathways a life will take. A person chooses different paths according to the text they communicate.

Through their bodies, enslaved Africans created their own crossroads. In these crossroads enslaved Africans (and their descendants) could perform magic through which they could make things happen. “This [or the crossroads] was where one went, as in Central Africa, to get in touch with one’s ancestors... This was where one went to ask favors of the cosmos” (Thompson 152). Forming crossroads is important for communication with God since God is the creator and can only be communicated to through an ancestor like Daniel or intermediary like Esu.

Fu-Kiau adds to the importance of crossroads for the Bakongo cosmogram. He suggests that the closest thing to being Godly, while still human, is to stand or be upright in the middle of the cosmogram and writes:

It is very important to understand also that to enter the V of life zone is to stand vertically [telama lwimba-ngânga] inside the V of life [V kia zîngu]. To stand vertically, like a master [ngânga] between the earth and the sky [va kati kwa n'toto ye zulu] and between the upper world and the lower world [va kati dia ku nseke ye ku mpèmbe] (28).

The vertex of the V, as illustrated in chapter 2, is located in the center of the cosmogram, which divides, through the kâlunga, and connects, through the bio-spiritual string, the upper and lower worlds. It is implied by Fu-Kiau that God is the master between the earth and skies and the lower and upper worlds. Thus, the way that we can be like God, without being God, is to vertically stand in the V, which is the center of the cosmogram, between the earth and skies and the lower and upper worlds. This action creates the situation where the kâlunga that is stood upon interacts with the bio-spiritual string of the person standing in the ring, creating a virtual crossroads. The V of life zone Fu-Kiau describes is the nexus of the crossroads, or the middle of the cosmogram. Those who stand at the nexus of the crossroads become human mediators.

In the center of the cosmogram one stands with the option to communicate text, which can be accomplished through the mouth or the body, into any direction one wishes, causing events to happen. Thompson adds to the importance of standing in the middle of the crossroads and writes that: "...the crossroads, remains an indelible concept in the Kongo-Atlantic world, as the point of intersection between the

ancestors and the living” (109). During the ring shout, the middle of the cosmogram is a unique and powerful space because it intersects the whole community, the part that is gathered in the ring shout above the *kâlunga*, or the humans, and the part that is summoned beneath the *kâlunga*, or the spirits and ancestors. The person in the V of life zone has the ability to immediately communicate spiritually and physically to the community surrounding her, which deliver the text to God. Whether traced out or danced out on the ground, when God’s power descends upon the cosmogram, which includes the members of the community, it has the ability to make things happen, which in turn gives the community a similar ability.

It is important to reemphasize that in order to get God’s power to descend upon the cosmogram, a community must get their message to the ancestors who will then pass it on to God. This is the power of *àshe*, or what Esu carries in the calabash. Gates notes Esu’s purpose in different contexts and writes that: “Each version of Esu is the sole messenger of the gods (in Yoruba, *iranse*), he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man to the gods” (Gates 6). To the Yoruba, Esu carries all messages. Esu can interpret texts spoken, communicated through the body, and other means such as sketching a cosmogram on an earthen container. Gates expands on this idea about Esu and writes that: “Esu is the guardian of the crossroads...connecting the truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation...” (Gates 6).

Esu in many ways is inextricable from the language of the Bakongo cosmogram. This is especially true of the shout when one considers that, “He [or Esu] is, moreover, as master of the roads and the crossroads, the master of ‘all steps taken,’ be these steps taken as one walks or the steps of a process [such as burial]” (Gates 31). The short steps taken in the shuffle of the shouters are indelible from Esu, especially considering that these steps are taken on top of and at the beginning of the crossroads.

The Gullahs that embody the Bakongo cosmogram display their understanding of the cosmos through the text and consciousness of their bodies when they shout. As Dr. Adeolu Ademoyo, a professor of Yoruba at Cornell University has suggested to me, the Bakongo cosmogram is also emblematic of Orita Meta¹⁹. Orita means junction and Meta means three. Through its counterclockwise circular lineage, the Bakongo cosmogram shows where the community is, where it has been, and where it wants/is about to go. The shouters perform the circular lineage of the Bakongo cosmogram and, thus, display their consciousness of the path of life and rebirth through their bodies.

Chapter 4 Conclusions

Far too often, we become illiterate to the text that surrounds us. In the case of the Gullahs, the illiteracy of their captors enabled them to perpetuate Bakongo (as well as Ovimbundu) notions of how the universe works and where their ancestors exist. They perpetuated philosophy and cosmology through their bodies that only their people and those with some real understanding of their culture could read. Their flesh became word. Performance was text.

If, as Kenyan born poet and playwright Micere Mugo suggests, all text is incomplete until performed, then, the Bakongo cosmogram is merely an incomplete text without the song, music and dance that is performed in reference. In other words, the elements of the ring shout complete the text of the Bakongo cosmogram.

¹⁹ Dr. Adeolu Ademoyo has suggested that Orita Meta is Yoruba for a three-point junction and a linguistic representation of the idea of the crossroads, the fate of the human being, the past, the present, and the future.

Chapter 5 – The Conclusion

Intersection is necessary for existence, communication, and life as we, or at least the Bakongo and their descendants, understand it. Without the horizontal and vertical planes that allow for the separation of the living and the dead (the *kâlunga*) and the communication of the living with ancestors and the ancestors with God (the bio-spiritual rope), there would be nothing to separate the living from the spirits or ancestors and both would cease to exist. In other words, who could say who was dead and who was living? Without the *kâlunga* and the bio-spiritual rope, there would be no gateway to the realm of the living or dead and there would be no bio-spiritual communication. Also, who could say who was biological and who was spiritual? Who would *draw the lines* on which everything stands, or that some shout on?

Through maintenance of the ring shout ritual, Gullahs perpetuated notions of the Bakongo cosmogram. They did this by creating a virtual Bakongo cosmogram that could not be written down and erased or easily identified by their foreign captors. One way that they perpetuated/perpetuate the philosophy of the Bakongo cosmogram was/is by using their landscape, bodies, and music with the ring shout. All three symbolized and manifested something different about the Bakongo cosmogram.

Through their landscape, the ground is the *kâlunga*. They bury their dead beneath the *kâlunga*. By placing seashells around gravesites the Gullah also acknowledge that the submerged realm exists beneath the ground, the water that holds ancestors and spirits.

The Gullahs mimic the rotation of the earth and the orbit of the earth around the sun through the counterclockwise direction of their bodies during the ring shout. It demonstrates that they understand that life and death is a cycle just as the earth rotates around the sun yearly or spins on its axis.

Enslaved Africans and their descendants communicate bio-spiritually beyond the *kâlunga*. Singing shout songs is bio-spiritual sonic communication through the bio-spiritual string that connects the living to those around them, the ancestors, and consequently God. This is performed by bringing up a memory of a certain ancestor or type of ancestor or expressing a certain longing for an individual (such as father or mother) or reality (such as freedom) through song. Shouting is also bio-spiritual communication expressing notions kinetically through the body to the ancestors and spirits as well as humans above the *kâlunga*. In contrast to shout songs, it is far more difficult to explain exactly what is being communicated through shouting. Shouting is far more individualized than it appears and people express different feelings through how hard they press their feet to the ground or the rhythm in which they shuffle.

The music of enslaved Africans and their descendants most associated with the ring shout is that of drums and when those were outlawed, it was produced with the polyrhythm of their hands, the shuffling of their feet, and even the broomstick. This is also a certain bio-spiritual communication that reaches the ancestors and spirits through the vibration and friction of feet, and sticks on the ground. The beat did not stop just because enslaved Africans were forced to live in North America. Neither was the enslaved Africans' ancestors killed just because they didn't make the long journey from their homeland to the coast of Angola or Ghana, just because they jumped overboard on the slave ship, or just because they were hanged over false accusation.

Speaking of ancestors, at midnight February 1st, 1991, Langston Hughes²⁰, had his 89th birthday. He died in Harlem, NY on May 22nd 1967 (Neilson 18). However, I speak of him in the present because I acknowledge him as an ancestor and carrying out

²⁰ Langston Hughes is a prolific Black American poet from Joplin, Missouri.

his life in the ancestral realm. His birthday was celebrated at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture by some significant Black American poets: Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka. The celebration was also held to dedicate the new auditorium in the center to Langston Hughes (“Schomburg” A6).

Langston Hughes’s ashes were buried beneath a cosmogram called *Rivers*, evidently inspired by his most cited poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (Boyd). The cosmogram was designed by Houston Conwill. He says that the “terrazzo floor is marked by a brass cosmogram bearing ‘song lines,’ texts, and literary signs in the tradition of African ritual ground markings...” Hughes’s remains are inside a stainless-steel book container beneath the emblem of a fish in the cosmogram’s center. Conwill says, “The fish signifies life, fecundity, and transformation.” The cosmogram contains twelve rivers that refer to the twelve bars of the traditional Blues form and are, to name a few, named after the Euphrates, Amazon, and Mississippi Rivers. He maintains that, “The Rivers cosmogram is intended to unearth the spirituality embedded in contemporary secular existence” (Conwill).

Not surprisingly in the middle of the cosmogram or the crossroads (or cross rivers), the fish is the signifier, symbolic of what names things or causes things to be named. Importantly, Langston Hughes’s ashes, his body, his text, his *àshe* is symbolically and literally in the center of the cosmogram, the vertex of crossroads. This is suggestive of his status as an important ancestral mediator for Black culture in the spirit world, under the *Rivers*. The ceremony is held at midnight for the common belief that at that time, spirits are able to interact with humans. Bringing this sacred art to life and completing the text that is embedded in the terrazzo floor, poets shouted in a counterclockwise motion along the circumference of the cosmogram containing Hughes’s ashes (Higgins). With their bodies, Amiri Baraka and Mya Angelou dedicated a beautiful poem to Langston Hughes. They also challenged the gender

dynamics of the shout, where, as I increasingly found in the Bakongo and Gullah context, the women shouted and the men made the music.

Bringing us closer to the present, there was another celebration of Hughes's birthday on February 1st, 2002. As if to feed the fish of the underwater world, poet Amiri Baraka pours a libation²¹ into the center of the cosmogram; from the looks of it, it is unknown if the libation was for Langston, Esu, or an ancestor from Amiri Baraka's family (Whitaker 70). As artists, Houston Conwill, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and others reopened, if it was ever closed, the heritage of the cosmogram and what it means in the Black American tradition. The Bakongo cosmogram is not only embodied by, but it is truly inextricable to and incomplete without the ring shout or its circular, sonic, and kinetic equivalent among the Bakongo. Through the artist's midnight performance, the path of Bakongo religious cosmology has come full circle.

Further Research Directions

Further research should be carried out on the Native American's influence on the ring shout of the Gullahs. Especially considering that much of northern Georgia was land that belonged to the Cherokee nation. I believe that the Ghost dance of the Cherokee bears (re)semblance to the ring shout in formation. Also, more in depth work on ring shout related practices elsewhere on the continent of Africa could be incorporated in order to expand the understanding of the ring shout that has been developed so far. The African burial ground is another site that should be given consideration as a cosmogram was built into the floor of its museum that is now a national landmark. Lastly, contemporary culture circles that Black Americans, especially in youth culture, engage in should be further investigated for the spiritual

²¹ A libation is a drink poured as an offering to an ancestor or deity.

significance that they hold in secular contexts; as well as the empirical and creative streams that they share with the ring shout.

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